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Allegiances and Prologue

Warriors; Secrets of the Shadows #1

Shadows of the Forest

Allegiances

ShadowClan

Leader- Darkstar

Slim black tom with green eyes

Deputy- Goldenshade

White she-cat with golden tints on ends of fur, striking blue eyes

Medicine Cat- Tigerlily

Plump orange tabby with brown eyes

Warriors

Grayfern-

Dark gray tabby she-cat

Longclaw-

White and black tom with long claws and yellow eyes

Cherryheart-

Young russet-furred she-cat with long whiskers

Maplefur-

Light brown tabby with amber eyes

Dusktide-

Black and gray tabby tom with silver eyes

Mothshadow-

Brown and black calico with yellow-green eyes

Eaglewings-

Brown tom with white chest and paws

Hawkflight-

Dark brown tom with white chest and legs

Sharpfang-

Silver tom with green eyes and jagged teeth

Sunfade-

Skinny golden tabby with amber eyes

Pebbletooth-

Broad white tom with gray muzzle and paws

Brokenleg-

Gray and white she-cat with a scar down foreleg

Adderstrike-

Furry black tom with hazel eyes

Ambersap-

Fox-red she-cat with dark green eyes

Greenpine-

Long-haired black tabby with a short tail

Paleleaf-

Pale gray she-cat with amber eyes

Nightpool-

Jet black she-cat with a pink nose and green eyes

Apprentices

Sparrowpaw-

Tabby and white tom with long whiskers and legs

Ravenpaw-

Mysterious black she-cat with dark brown eyes

Emberpaw-

Ginger and white she-cat with one blue eye, one silver

Shadepaw-

Dark tabby tom with silver eyes

Blackpaw-

Dark tabby tom with blue eyes

Icepaw-

Silver she-cat with bright hazel eyes

Brackenpaw-

Brown tabby tom with black stripes and brown eyes

Stormpaw-

Blue-gray she-cat with amber eyes

Queens

Mintfoot-

White she-cat with silver markings, expecting kits

Featherfall-

Cream-colored she-cat with hazel eyes, mother of Stonekit, Birdkit, and Leafkit

Elders

Molefoot-

Black and white tom with amber eyes

Oakleaf-

Cream-colored she-cat with white muzzle and green eyes

Lightwater-

Broad gray tabby tom with yellow eyes

Duststorm-

Small white tom with graying muzzle

Prologue

"We knew what would happen when skills of all the clans were combined!" A furry she-cat with raggedy fur and a rasping old voice hissed.

Three other cats sat there. A white tom with black feet had his head down, thinking hard.

A third cat, a small tabby tom, stared at the she-cat. "Yellowfang, we don't know for sure if this is going to be a problem."

Yellowfang turned her head to the tom she sat beside. "Raggedstar, this can't possibly be a good thing, can it?"

The tom, faded from his age, only stared at the green forest

surrounding.

"It's only a few kits. We have time to warn Darkstar about what could happen. These kits have the power to destroy all the clans, yes. But do the kits know this? Does Dusktide understand that?" The white tom asked.

"Not neccesarily, but, Blackstar, what if the kits turn against their Clan?" Yellowfang mewed.

The little tabby's ear swiveled to the sound of paws on grass.

Behind him, approached a large, regal flame color tabby. His pelt was thorough with stars and his body bright with the forever remembrance of his clanmates, unlike Raggedstar's, who'd long forgotten his short reign. The tom's green eyes blazed with uncertainty.

"What's the problem here?" He meowed.

"Firestar. Fancy meeting you here," Yellowfang meowed. "Littlecloud and Blackstar don't agree on the fact that the clans are in danger."

"What danger?" The ginger tom stepped closer.

"Flameheat. Remember her? The slim ginger she-cat? She was half-clan. ThunderClan and WindClan. And then, Dusktide. RiverClan and ShadowClan. The two of them mated. The kits, who harness all these skills, and even maybe have some SkyClan blood, were brought to ShadowClan, where Dusktide lived. When Flameheat came to join ShadowClan to raise her kits as well, she was killed in a fox trap. Perhaps, StarClan's will," Yellowfang explained hastily. "Now, you might think, these kits can swim, and fight in the shadows, chase rabbits across a moor, climb trees, navigate through forest. But there's something more in them."

"Pshh. Like what?" Littlecloud snorted.

"Like, the longing to feel blood under their claws. ShadowClan's heritage, if you ask me."

"They aren't going to kill their Clanmates or any of that. You can continue to worry, Yellowfang, but you're only kidding yourself," Blackstar mewed, and with that, dove off into the shadows of the forest.

Littlecloud dipped his head to the three remaining cats and split his own way, huffing.

Yellowfang sighed as Raggedstar, too, left. Only Firestar remained with her.

"Don't worry. These kits will be the savior of the Clans, not the end. I promise." He smiled, before turning away and climbing up the slope, disappearing the way he came.

Yellowfang climbed to her own paws and stared up at the sky.

"You saved the clans numerous times, Firestar. But this time, I don't trust you."

She took a deep breath and spun away, heading deeper into the shadows of the trees.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Emberkit blinked open her eyes, quickly adjusting to the darkness of the nursery. She made her way to the front of the den, where light shone onto a sleeping queen, three kits snoozing in the curve of her cream colored tail.

This was Featherfall, a new mother, and her three kits, Stonekit, Birdkit, and Leafkit. They were newborn, three moons younger than Emberkit and her littermates, and were a lot smaller than her, too.

Emberkit's own littermates were already out in the clearing. Her two brothers, Shadekit and Blackkit. They both had dark pelts like her father, Dusktide. She had a ginger and white pelt, close to her mother's, who she had never really met.

This usually got between the kits, making Emberkit feel more alone than ever.

She had taken a quicker liking to Sparrowpaw and Ravenpaw, brother and sister. Sparrowpaw was nice and always taught her what he'd learned the same day, and Ravenpaw was stealthy and secretive, but spent plenty of time beside Emberkit.

That morning, Shadekit and Blackkit seemed to be waiting for Dusktide to return from the border patrol. They sat by the camp entrance, looking calm and relaxed, but really, they must've been worried. There had been border skirmishes involving RiverClan and on another border, ThunderClan. It was odd, two clans at the same time. But Emberkit didn't question that there was a reason to it.

"Hey, Emberkit!" Sparrowpaw's tabby pelt caught her eye as he leapt over. "Wanna play mossball?"

She did, but he always won anyway. She was somehow faster, but he always caught the ball and shot it way over her head, like she

could actually catch it.

"Okay." She agreed.

They played for a while in the clearing until the mossball disappeared into a row of thorn bushes lining the edge of the camp.

"I'll get it!" Emberkit squeaked, darting across the camp.

"We could just get another one," Sparrowpaw called, but Emberkit disregarded him and lunged over a thorny branch, into a bush.

She rooted around for the moss and found it behind a thick screen of tendrils. She thought about going in for it before turning back toward the camp.

Just then, she heard a yowl of distress. Her father's voice.

Emberkit scurried out from the bush, toward the entrance of the clearing, where other cats were already gathered. She shoved through the crowd and found herself staring at the patrol, mostly wounded. In her clanmate Mothshadow's mouth was a limp tom, which she laid down and backed away from, her eyes filled with grief. Emberkit's heart pounded in horror. Her eyes searched for her father in the group and caught his eyes before she was picked up and carried back into the nursery.

She was laid gently in a nest, where she slept with the queen who took care of her, Mintfoot. The she-cat was expecting kits in a later time, and she took good care of Emberkit and her siblings.

"Stay in here while I find your brothers."

She'd expected Mintfoot, but instead, it was a voice she only heard in clan meetings. Darkstar, a slim but strong handsome young tom stood behind her. The clan leader.

"Okay." She mewed, sitting upright and licking her chest fur. She'd seen other she-cats do this in his prescense.

He flicked his tail and left, soon returning with Shadekit and Blackkit following behind him. "Stay here. I'll find Mintfoot." He

turned away from them and left.

"Why is it so important that we don't leave the nursery? Or that Mintfoot has to be with us?" Blackkit mewed, distraught.

"I dunno, maybe he just doesn't want us to see the injuries. I'm sure we could've handled it." Shadekit responded.

Emberkit stared at her brothers. There was a squeak from one of Featherfall's kits, and Emberkit noticed that Featherfall wasn't even there.

Soon later, Featherfall and Mintfoot both entered the nursery. Something bad was happening, and Emberkit wanted to know what it was.

She peered out of the nursery, and stared in surprise.

A large group of cats stood in the clearing, with thin, agile bodies. In the front of the group, facing Darkstar, was a broad tabby tom with green eyes. He looked angry.

Darkstar's tail was lashing with anger as well.

And then, the tabby leapt at their leader.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Emberkit gasped in horror and stepped with one foot out of the nursery, but Mintfoot gripped her scruff and pulled her back inside.

"Let me defend my leader!" She squealed.

"You're only a kit! Besides, Goldenshade has his back." Mintfoot scolded.

Emberkit ripped away from the she-cat and looked into the clearing.

Goldenshade was the deputy, a beautiful white she-cat with a golden tint on her fur that looked much like her name. She had deep blue eyes that Emberkit longed for. She had one silver eye and one pale blue eye, which was unlike any other ShadowClan cat.

The she-cat was busy ripping the leader from hers, while another cat leapt at her. They crashed over into a pile, while Goldenshade wriggled out from under a cat and pinned him down.

Darkstar had the other cat on the ground, his flanks heaving, his eyes blazing in anger. "Minnowstar, why have you come?"

One of the cats of the group began to approach, but Goldenshade snarled, and the cat stepped back.

"You must excuse my behavior. I come in peace." The cat grunted as Darkstar put his paw down on his neck.

"That's your idea of peaceful?" Goldenshade hissed. "Our patrol just returned with a fallen warrior and plenty of injuries!" Goldenshade dug her claws into the cat she had pinned.

The cat began to explain in a hoarse voice. Emberkit turned to Mintfoot. "Who are those cats?"

"RiverClan cats, by that fishy smell." Mintfoot stood beside Emberkit, eyes narrowed.

Emberkit turned her head and strained her ears again to listen.

"You have plenty of territory. Why would you need more, especially in Greenleaf?"

"None of your business!" Minnowstar snapped.

A gray she-cat with green eyes snorted and stepped forward, dipping her head to Goldenshade. "He thinks we might sound weak. We need more land because the river is shallow. No fish. I mean, we can manage for now in the land we have, but there's just not enough prey."

"Attacking our cats isn't the answer. Have you talked to WindClan?"

"We aren't going to chase rabbits over the moor, Darkstar." Minnowstar hissed.

"Okay. Then, you aren't going to find food here, either. Might as well cross our borders and go plead ThunderClan to help you." The black tom unsheathed his claws.

He leapt off of Minnowstar, and Goldenshade did the same.

"Why are you so cruel?"

"This is why." He beckoned at the limp body of a warrior that Emberkit didn't know. "You killed Pinetail, and for what?"

Minnowstar narrowed his eyes. "Darkstar, this isn't over." He bounded from the clearing, leading his group away into the pines.

Emberkit crept from the nursery and searched for her father. She finally spotted him, helping a tabby she-cat to the medicine cat den. She was limping, but still smiling.

Emberkit raced over to her dad and waited outside the medicine cat den for him. She heard the voice of Tigerlily, their medicine cat.

Dusktide reappeared, appearing unharmed. "Emberkit, get back to the nursery." He scolded.

"I don't wanna!" She wailed.

Dusktide lashed his tail. "We don't have time to worry about kits in the nursery." He hissed. "Tigerlily had a dream from StarClan last night, about a danger. I love you, Emberkit, but we have to get rid of the danger."

"What danger?" She mewed. "What's wrong?"

Dusktide shook his head. "I don't have time to explain to you." He turned and padded over a group of warriors.

"He never has time to do anything with us." Emberkit heard Shadekit and Blackkit's pawsteps as they approached.

"Yeah." Emberkit sighed.

There was a yowl from Darkstar. Emberkit wanted to hear the meeting, but Mintfoot grasped her scruff and pulled her back into the nursery. Shadekit and Blackkit followed obediently.

Emberkit didn't have to leave the nursery to hear the leader's words. "StarClan has already given us a fair warning about some sort of danger. I think that danger is RiverClan. They're a threat to us, demanding more territory. I know many of you want to go after them, but until we're sure of the danger, we shouldn't do anything."

There were a few yowls of protest, but Darkstar simply silenced the crowd with a flick of his tail. "If the problem continues, we'll fight. But bloodshed, right now, isn't the answer."

More yowls of anger. Emberkit knew that most of her Clanmates had no problem killing other cats, if there was a reason to or not.

Darkstar dipped his head and leapt down from the branch hanging over his den.

Emberkit stared out into the camp before curling up in her nest to nap.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Emberkit leapt for the small pine branch, her feet landing loudly and unneatly underneath her. She had easily misjudged the distance and was still at least a tail-length away from it.

"Your prey would definitely know you were there." Sparrowpaw meowed.

Emberkit's ears drooped.

"Hey, I didn't get it right the first time either. Try again, using the crouch I taught you."

Emberkit looked up at Sparrowpaw, sitting near the bramble thicket den that was the apprentice's den. He smiled at her, and she smiled back. Backing up, she bunched her legs beneath her, putting less weight on her haunches. Then, she concentrated, her eyes wide, her back moving to reposition her legs under her, and leapt.

This time, one paw hit the pine branch, the other farther in the air. In a split second, that leg crumpled beneath her, and she hit the ground with a small thump. "Oof!"

The scent of mint caught Emberkit's nose. She glanced up.

Ravenpaw was watching, with a clump of mint clamped in her jaws. "You're doing okay, for such a young cat."

Emberkit said nothing, only climbed to her paws.

Sparrowpaw moved over to her. "Okay, now, I'll-"

"Sparrowpaw."

A broad but fluffy black tom padded over; Sparrowpaw's mentor, Adderstrike. He laid his ears back. "Darkstar wants us to go to the

RiverClan border."

Sparrowpaw nodded. "Okay." He meowed. "See you later, Emberkit."

The two cats joined Goldenshade and another warrior, named Nightpool. They disappeared through the thorn tunnel, into the pine forests that Emberkit had never seen.

She tried to follow them, but Ravenpaw immediately stopped her. "What are you thinking, Emberkit?" She thrust the she-cat back with a forceful paw.

"I just want to see the forest." She mewed, flicking her ear. "Please? I'll be careful!"

"No way. It's not a safe environment for a kit."

"I'm not a kit!" Emberkit tried to sound powerful, but it came out as a squeak.

"Last time I checked, you were. I have to go tend to the elders." Ravenpaw sighed, looking over at the group. There was a black and white tom called Molefoot, a cream colored she-cat called Oakleaf, a broad gray tom named Lightwater, and a small white tom with a gray muzzle, Duststorm.

"Fine." Emberkit hissed. She watched as Ravenpaw walked over to the elders, who were only lying in the shadows of their den, and turned away. Maybe she could get an apprentice to play with her. There were a lot of apprentices in ShadowClan. The oldest were very close to their assessments, Cherrypaw and Maplepaw. The others were all in between.

Emberkit found Stormpaw, a blue-gray she-cat, eating prey by herself. She padded over and mewed, "Wanna play mossball?"

Stormpaw only shook her head, and Emberkit sighed. If she didn't want to, then why would any of the other apprentices want to play with her?

Emberkit went to the nursery. Her brothers were still sleeping, and

Mintfoot was eating a frog, paying no mind to either. Emberkit ran over and prodded both of them.

Shadekit raised his head. "What?" He mewed drowsily.

"I have a good idea. You just have to come with me." She whispered.

Shadekit nodded, standing up and stretching. Blackkit curled up tighter and whispered, "No thanks."

Mintfoot turned her head. "What are you up to?" She mewed.

"Just going to play mossball." Emberkit said casually.

Mintfoot turned her head and continued eating.

Shadekit and Emberkit crept out of the den, and Emberkit led him into the thorn bush to talk.

"Okay, so I've devised a plan to get out of this boring camp." She meowed. "First, we make sure nobody is looking. Darkstar might've posted some guards at the entrance, so we're going to sneak behind them and silently run away."

"Okay." Shadekit responded.

"Then, we can just explore."

The two kits hurried to the thorn tunnel. They sat beside it, casually, for a few moments, and then bolted out of the clearing.

At the top, Emberkit could make out sloped ground through pine forests. "Woah." She breathed, barely more than a whisper.

On both sides of the entrance, there were warriors guarding it. Emberkit snuck behind one, her paws light on the pine needles.

Shadekit followed her, less quiet. He slid on the surface of the pine and fell down with a sharp, "Oof!"

The guard turned his head. "Get back into camp." He growled, his

eyes narrowed.

Emberkit gulped and mewed, "Run!"

The two kits bolted up the slope, running through the trees. The tom easily kept pace. Emberkit panicked and fled one way, immediately crashing downward a few feet into a thorn bush.

Thorns poked at her skin, and she yelped in pain. Wriggling away from a tendril, thorns embedded in her fur and the tendril snapped back. She flattened herself to the ground and crawled out from under the bush.

"Half-clan cats never learn." The tom hissed, leaping down beside her. "Let's go."

"Half- clan?" Emberkit mewed. "What's that?"

"It means, your mother was from one clan, or in this case, she was half-clan, and your father is also half-clan. So, now you have abilities, and ancestry, from all the clans." The broad tom hissed in disgust.

Emberkit stared at him in terror. "What does that mean?"

"It means you don't belong here."

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

"I look fine, Mintfoot!" Emberkit struggled away from the she-cat. "You don't have to groom me."

Mintfoot sighed, straightening up. "Fine with me." She meowed. Emberkit followed her brothers into the clearing, where an apprentice, Palepaw, was receiving her warrior name.

"Palepaw, you will now be known as Paleleaf. May StarClan guide you throughout the life of a warrior."

The small pale gray she-cat's eyes gleamed as a few cats cheered her new name. She padded over to Maplefur and Cherryheart, her old denmates, and they congratulated her happily.

"Now I will give the kits in the nursery their apprentice names and mentors." Darkstar mewed.

Emberkit watched as Shadekit recieved his name and mentor, a warrior named Longclaw. Blackkit went next, getting Maplefur as his mentor.

Now Emberkit stood up and padded over to Darkstar.

"Emberkit, you will now be known as Emberpaw. Your mentor will be Cherryheart."

Emberpaw dipped her head to her leader and looked up at her new mentor. The she-cat was laughing and chattering like a blackbird with Maplefur, and barely even looked at Emberpaw when they touched noses.

Emberpaw felt excitement rush through her when her clanmates cheered her new name, along with Shadepaw and Blackpaw. The sun was still high in the sky; plenty of time to explore the territory.

The cats parted and went into dens, or other places in the clearing. A patrol left the camp, and the other kits ran from the nursery excitedly, racing around the clearing. The elders reassembled themselves at the foot of their den, with Molefoot crouched inside against a blast of icy air.

Cherryheart allowed Emberpaw to eat before touring the territory. Emberpaw picked a plump mouse and scarfed it down fast, impatiently waiting to leave the camp without having to sneak out for the first time.

Cherryheart led the way from the clearing and out into the forest. She sat down under a pine tree in the shadow and began to groom herself.

"Aren't you going to give me a tour?" Emberpaw meowed.

Cherryheart flexed her claws. "You're perfectly capable of touring yourself."

Emberpaw laid her ears back. "Right. Remind me to tell Darkstar about this later."

Cherryheart looked up from the fur she was grooming. "You play a dangerous game, but you are no more than a kit, and I'm not scared of you."

Emberpaw sighed loudly and spun around. "Okay." She meowed. She moved away, through the pine trees. There was nothing great about the forest. It was cold, and the sun was going to set in the sky soon. Emberpaw made her way through the trees, tasting the air.

After a long walk, she came across a strong, weird scent. She kept walking, cautiously. She glanced around every few seconds, her steps a bit confident but her legs trembling.

A bush rustled. She turned, her ears perked. The rush of a nearby river drowned out the noise of more leaves rustling closer to the river, but she could see the fern moving.

Too late, she realized that she'd left the pine forest behind. *So this must be RiverClan...*

She started padding closer to the river, claws unsheathed. The fern was swaying in the wind, she noticed. That was it.

She sighed in relief and started toward the border.

She got a tail-length before something crashed into her side. There was an icy shock as she landed in the river. Her bones felt frozen, and her heart pounded.

Have to find the surface...

Emberpaw paddled up toward the light of the sun. Already sinking. It stained the surface of the water red like blood.

Emberpaw's head broke the surface. For some reason, swimming felt natural.

Clutching a wet stone, a young tom with amber eyes and silver fur stared at her. "You can swim?" He hissed over the roar of the river.

Emberpaw lunged for the surface, her body shaking with cold. She bounded along the pebbly shore, toward ShadowClan territory. But the cat stopped her, leaping at her and taking her down onto the stones.

"What are you doing on my territory?" He hissed.

"I didn't realize I crossed the border." She responded, panting.

He stared at her before backing away. "Okay. Well, get out of here."

Emberpaw dipped her head. She spun and crashed over the ground, back to the forest.

Once in the shadows of the trees, she sat and calmed down.

"Worst tour ever." She muttered, shaking water droplets from her fur and grooming herself before returning to where Cherryheart had been sitting.

The she-cat was snoozing there, her head on her paws. Emberpaw rolled her eyes and left her there, making her way down into camp.

When she got there, Mintfoot was sitting in the clearing with Shadepaw and Blackpaw. She padded over, and Mintfoot glanced up. "How was it?"

Emberpaw shrugged. "It was okay, thanks." She mewed, padding to the apprentices' den.

Sparrowpaw met her at the entrance. "Ravenpaw and I made your nest!" He meowed excitedly.

"Thank you." Emberpaw purred. She glanced up at him. Sparrowpaw had grown taller and larger, almost completed his apprentice training. It disappointed her, to think that they'd only be denmates for a short time.

Ravenpaw curled up in one of the nests. "We also did Shadepaw's nest, and Blackpaw's." She mewed. "Sparrowpaw's on your left, and Blackpaw on your right. It's a bit crowded now, so..."

"That's okay." Emberpaw mewed, lying down in her nest. Feathers protruded from layers of moss. She lied her head down on it, and felt as though she immediately fell asleep.

When she awoke, she was lying by a river. A cold spray hit her fur, startling her. She stood up and stood back from the river.

Across it, stood a tall russet-furred she-cat, with light blue eyes.

"Greetings, Emberpaw." She meowed.

"Where am I? Who are you?" Emberpaw glanced at the she-cat, stars twined in her fur, eyes bright.

"My name is Dawnshadow. And, you know where you are. RiverClan. You must be wondering why you can swim so well." She mewed, sounding almost hasty.

"Yeah. I have blood from all of the clans. I know." She snorted.

"Yes. But do you know what that means?"

"Well, I don't know, maybe," She started.

"It means that you can do things that your clanmates can't, and beyond. You possess power that-"

"Dawnshadow."

An older tom, white with black feet, appeared from a thick mist that Emberpaw hadn't noticed was wreathing around them.

Dawnshadow's eyes blazed as the tom led her away.

"Wait, what? Come back here! I don't understand!" She called, but the area around her was fading, and the two cats were gone.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Dim light was shining through the brambles when Emberpaw was shaken awake.

"You're on dawn patrol with me." Ravenpaw mewed. "And then Cherryheart will take you battle training with your brothers."

Emberpaw groaned. "Battle training? Do I have to?"

Ravenpaw flicked her ear. "What are you, a kitten?" She remarked.

Emberpaw growled at her clanmate and stood, shaking moss clumps from her fur. She pushed past Ravenpaw, her ears laid back.

The dawn patrol consisted of Nightpool, a she-cat named Brokenleg, Cherryheart, Ravenpaw, and Emberpaw. As soon as she joined them, they set off into the forest.

Raindrops fell from the branches on the pine trees, as it had rained last night. Emberpaw flinched against a cold drop on her head. The marshy woodland was even more muddy than usual, caking Emberpaw's legs when they sunk into the the wet ground.

"You'll get used to it." Cherryheart nudged her forward.

Emberpaw made her way after Nightpool to the RiverClan border. She'd been here before, and she could make out the fishy smell of the cats across the border before she saw them, racing over the ground slowly. Compared to Emberpaw, they were like fat toads hopping away.

The leader of the patrol, a handsome silver tabby with bright blue eyes, made his way closer to the border and dipped his head to the ShadowClan patrol. The rest of his group laid their ears back.

Cherryheart growled at the group. "Back off," She warned.

Nightpool shouldered past the younger she-cat. "Waterglow. How nice to meet you here. Don't mind Cherryheart, she's a bit younger than I, and still doesn't understand what it looks like to come in peace."

"Hey!" Cherryheart whined, but Waterglow, the tom, continued.

"All conflict between us, over the prey incident, were moons ago." He confirmed. "And Minnowstar is perfectly fine with it. Most of us managed through that Greenleaf."

Nightpool dipped her head. "We didn't have much territory to spare. How are you doing, now that Leaf-fall is nearly over?"

"The river and streams have already frozen over. But, we'll be fine." The tom meowed cheerfully.

"Enough chat." Brokenleg mewed, her eyes narrowed. "Nightpool, since when were you so social with other clans?"

Nightpool muttered something and turned away.

Emberpaw's eyes met Waterglow's before the tom turned and led his cats away.

Cherryheart and Brokenleg began to mark the border, while Emberpaw took in the little details of this task.

"We have two borders." Ravenpaw was explaining. "One with RiverClan, and one with ThunderClan. There's usually no trouble between us and ThunderClan, unless one of our warriors goes and makes it."

Emberpaw just nodded as the patrol started back to camp.

Cherryheart led Emberpaw aside and made her way confidently through the pines, Emberpaw easily keeping up. In the forest was a dirt clearing, although the dirt was mud from the rain that had lightened to a drizzle.

Shadepaw and Blackpaw were standing there, their pelts clotted with mud, both panting. Their mentors, Maplefur and Longclaw,

were watching with approval in their eyes.

Cherryheart padded over to Maplefur and sat down.

"Okay, Emberpaw. I'll show the move to you, then I want you to copy it on Shadepaw." Longclaw meowed.

Emberpaw nodded.

Longclaw nodded to Maplefur and leapt at her, landing on her shoulders and bringing her to the ground. He then hooked a paw under her right shoulder, forcing it to the side, and pinned her down.

Emberpaw watched in bewilderment. "How am I supposed to do that?" She meowed.

"Your brothers did it." Longclaw responded. "Now get up and humor me, attack Shadepaw."

Emberpaw glanced at Shadepaw, whose flanks were still heaving from the effort of the tactic they'd been doing before.

She charged, leaping up to land on his shoulders. But he was faster, dodging to the left and turning.

Emberpaw's legs hit the ground sloppily. She turned, unbalanced, as Shadepaw crashed into her, sending her sprawling awkwardly on her side.

Longclaw watched as Shadepaw forced her shoulder over, planting her on her back, and pinning her.

"You added a nice new move and defense to the attack. Very well done, Shadepaw." Longclaw meowed.

The dark tabby sprang off. Emberpaw climbed to her paws, shaking wet globs of mud from her fur.

"Blackpaw, your turn. This time, let Emberpaw complete the move, and next time, try to defend yourself from the attack." Maplefur commanded.

Blackpaw stood in front of Emberpaw, his eyes narrowed.

Emberpaw dashed forward, lunging up for her brother's shoulders again. This time, she made it, and unbalanced, he crashed to the ground, sending her on her stomach in the mud.

"No! Do it again. This time, Blackpaw, fight back." Cherryheart ordered.

Emberpaw shook with rage and stood up. Moving back to where she'd been before, she stretched her back legs and took off once more.

This time, Blackpaw dodged far too early, and Emberpaw easily turned to where he'd moved and leaped. Blackpaw was unprepared for the move and Emberpaw landed messily, driving one of his shoulders into the ground.

Blackpaw yowled in pain, and Emberpaw leapt off. Maplefur moved over, nudging her backwards. The brown tabby gripped Blackpaw's scruff and pulled him to his paws, not without a screech of pain.

Below where his shoulder had been, a rock protruded from the ground. Maplefur's eyes burned with anger and she turn to Emberpaw.

"Look what you've done!" She growled, her tail lashing. Her unsheathed claws dug into the mud.

"I was only doing what you taught me." She responded quietly.

"Not well enough," Maplefur sighed.

"Leave Emberpaw alone." Longclaw meowed. "She didn't get the move right, but look. She injured a cat. That's what the fight was for in the first place. Maplefur, take Blackpaw back to camp for treatment. We'll continue here."

Emberpaw felt grateful that the tom had intervened, but sick to her stomach that she'd have to continue the training.

"As you know, there are some more minor attacks, like, raking your

claws down the front of a cat, or down the back. You can use those in any attack." Longclaw explained. "Shadepaw, come here."

The tom nodded and stood forward.

Longclaw pivoted slightly and thrust his shoulder at Shadepaw, using his weight to knock the smaller tom down easily. He turned and pinned the smaller tom down, both paws on his shoulders.

"Now what are you going to do?"

Shadepaw immediately tried to move his front paws, but he was held to the ground fast. He then tried to bite Longclaw's face, but couldn't reach that, either. The tom then gave up, looking helplessly up at his mentor.

"You can barely do anything, can you?" Longclaw's eyes gleamed as Shadepaw nodded immediately.

"Good. The shoulder thing I did, it would be good if you learned how to do this, and keep your weight on your back leg as well, so you don't lose your balance. Now, I'll let you up, and demonstrate with Cherryheart what to do to avoid being pinned."

Emberpaw watched as Longclaw demonstrated kicking his legs out as Cherryheart tried to get on top of him. He then thrust his legs out, throwing Cherryheart off and skillfully rolling onto his paws before getting up and leaping on top of her, thrusting her to the ground.

"Now, Emberpaw. Try to get your legs over you before Shadepaw can pin you."

Emberpaw licked dried mud from her pelt quickly before she stood, facing Shadepaw. Her brother darted toward her, thrusting out his shoulder and throwing himself at her.

She fell back and kicked her legs out as Shadepaw's weight crashed down on her legs, which quickly quaked beneath him and fell.

"Try again." Longclaw encouraged.

They did it again until Emberpaw got the first part right, and then they switched, Emberpaw charging at Shadepaw. Shadepaw thrust his legs out, but Emberpaw didn't keep her balance when crashing into him, and once again, sprawled on the ground.

Emberpaw finally did it, finding that Shadepaw was unable to get his legs under him. She triumphantly pinned him time and time again, only to find that Shadepaw was too frustrated to care about what she was doing.

"We'll try again tomorrow night, when we teach you how to move silently in the dark." Cherryheart meowed eagerly.

Emberpaw followed her mentor back to camp and was met by Dusktide, who shoved her backward with a paw.

"What happened to your brother was your fault? Is that true?" Her father meowed, his tail lashing back and forth.

"I was only-"

"His shoulder is wrenched. He can't participate in any training activities until it's mended and given time to heal. Do you know how disappointed he is, because of you?" Dusktide snapped.

Emberpaw gulped and stared at her paws. "I didn't mean for it to happen." She responded, barely more than a whisper.

"I know you didn't." A calmer tone replied to her. She glanced back up at her father, and he smiled. "It's okay. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have been so harsh."

Her father flicked her ear with his tailtip and padded away to the warriors' den. Her eyes followed him until he disappeared into the thicket.

Emberpaw headed to the fresh-kill pile and took a shrew back to the apprentice's den, already hating the responsibility of an apprentice.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Emberpaw clumsily shot after Sparrowpaw. The lanky tom had the advantage of his long legs and lean, muscular body, while Emberpaw had nothing. He raced through the dark pines, and Emberpaw, breathing hard, struggled to keep up.

Suddenly, Emberpaw forced herself into longer strides. She corrected her footing and sped up, curving her back at each step. She was running now, her paws barely connecting with the ground. She moved through the shadows and quickly gained on Sparrowpaw, who seemed to gallop at her side.

“Give it up, Emberpaw! You’ll never beat me!” He taunted playfully.

Emberpaw raced forward and leapt onto a tree stump, overlooking the marsh. She bunched her haunches beneath her and sprang.

She sailed through the air before easily landing in the center of the marsh on a mud-stained stone. Mucky water sat below her.

Sparrowpaw glanced at her. “That was a pretty good jump,” He commented. “But I’ll find a way to the border before you!” With that, the long-limbed tom bounded off.

Emberpaw tilted her head, looking for an escape from the center of the marsh. She quickly noticed a wilted looking lily pad closer to firm ground and crouched down. With a prepared wiggle, she leapt.

She landed front paws first on the pad. Unbalanced, with her back legs not fitting on the pad, they crashed into the mud. She yelped and pulled the front of herself onto the lily pad, and then tried paddling to the shore.

She needed the strength of her front legs as well, so she slowly

lowered herself into the lukewarm water.

She paddled the short way back to the firm land and pulled herself out, fuming. She shook her pelt and raced for the stream, feeling the mud already drying in her pelt.

She stared into the ripples of the stream before crouching in the cold water. Much of the mud lifted from her pelt.

She stood up and was immediately taken by surprise by a flying ball of gray-blue fur to her left. It crashed into her before she could move, and she was pinned beside the stream.

Emberpaw looked up at a slim blue-gray she cat with amber eyes. Her eyes widened in realization; this was Stormpaw.

“Well done, Stormpaw. If that was actually an intruder, I would applaud you,” A tom sneered from the bushes. Brackenpaw leapt out at her, and she backed up a bit as he crawled closer to her.

Behind him, a white she-cat, Icepaw, approached Stormpaw. “You aren’t even close to being ready for our warrior assessments tomorrow,” She rubbed up against Brackenpaw, and he narrowed his eyes at Stormpaw.

Icepaw’s gaze drifted over to Emberpaw, who was watching in confusion. “Hey, you,” She barked. “Get out of here.”

Emberpaw watched as Stormpaw’s angry gaze turned toward her and calmed. “See you around, Emberpaw,” She muttered.

Emberpaw, who had never been treated as an equal by the pretty cat, dipped her head and raced off.

She dashed straight into Sparrowpaw, who was grooming himself by a tree.

“Hey, Emberpaw, where’d you go?” He purred.

“You aren’t much younger than Stormpaw, are you?” She asked.

He paused. “No… Why do you ask?”

She beckoned with her tail through the trees. He stood up and padded over to the trees, peering around some pine branches.

She crept after him. “Well?”

Sparrowpaw flicked an ear. “There’s nobody there.” He mewed.

Emberpaw moved around him and over to the stream. “Well, not anymore. We got to go find them. They were being rude to Stormpaw.”

He stretched his back leg. “Not to be mean, Emberpaw, but I don’t think you should get involved.” He gave a nod.
“Well then, I’ll track them myself.” She mewed in return and then scented the air. She followed the faint scent left by the three cats and it led her to the training hollow.

She crouched down and looked into the clearing. Sure enough, Stormpaw sat, her head high despite the two cats spitting at her. Next to her, she felt Sparrowpaw’s tail rest on her shoulder as he watched.

“What do you want from me?” Stormpaw hissed.

“We need you to get out of here.” Icepaw answered.

“You’re my sister, Icepaw. Why would you ask me to leave?”

Icepaw flicked her tail back and forth. “Darkstar has already favored you more than us…” She whispered, drawing closer to her sister. “I wouldn’t want to be the one to spoil that for you, but it looks like it has to be that way.”

In a split second, claws raked over Stormpaw’s eye. The she-cat staggered back, but Brackenpaw leapt in from the side, surrounding her.

Sparrowpaw let out a yowl and threw himself after the older apprentices.

Brackenpaw turned his head and let out a growl of disgust. “Sparrowpaw, stay out of it,” He hissed.

Sparrowpaw's tail lashed. "I refuse to let you do this to your own Clanmates."

Brackenpaw unsheathed long claws. "You're asking for a fight, Sparrowpaw."

"No. I'm asking for you to not fight each other. Listen harder next time," The bold tom spat.

Brackenpaw lunged for Sparrowpaw.

Emberpaw hiccupped and thought about going after him, but she hardly knew any attack moves. She shrunk back but watched all the same.

Sparrowpaw dodged to the side and spun, throwing himself at an unprepared Brackenpaw. The tom lost balance, and Sparrowpaw pinned him to the ground.

Stormpaw yelped in anger as Icepaw battered her with claws unsheathed. The blue-gray cat fought back, her claws raking down Icepaw's front. The white she-cat bounced backwards, and narrowed her eyes.

"What's going on here?" An angry yowl sounded.

Adderstrike crossed the clearing, staring around at all the cats. The furry black tom looked furiously at Sparrowpaw.

"You are supposed to be getting ready to go on a hunting patrol," He spat. "Now, explain to me what is going on."

Sparrowpaw gulped. "Emberpaw said Icepaw and Brackenpaw were arguing with Stormpaw. She followed their scent trail to here, and they were attacking her," He explained hurriedly.

Adderstrike immediately whirled around to glare at the two apprentices.

"You're all almost warriors! Icepaw, Brackenpaw, how could you have done this?" He crossed over to Stormpaw, whose blood ran from her scratched eye. "Can you get to the camp? Sparrowpaw,

can you go with her?" The tabby tom nodded. "And as for you two," Adderstrike hissed. "You two can talk to me."

Sparrowpaw led the way through the trees, forgetting where Emberpaw was crouched. She hurried after the two cats and easily caught up.

"Emberpaw, Sparrowpaw, I owe you one," She meowed as shadows moved over her pelt.

"Don't worry about it." Sparrowpaw flicked the older cat's ear with his tail. "What *was* that about, anyway?"

"They want to be leader, both of them, one day. And since Darkstar has been watching me through my training… They're just jealous." She mewed.

Emberpaw was shocked that jealousy had led to what she'd witnessed.

They descended into the camp. Stormpaw's mother, Greenpine, was grooming in the shadow of the warriors' den, not knowing what had just happened between her kits.

Emberpaw watched Sparrowpaw help Stormpaw to the medicine cat's den before moving across the camp to Darkstar's den, unsure of whether she should talk to him or not.

Before she could decide, Goldenshade's scent washed over her. "Hello, Emberpaw," she meowed, dipping her head.

Emberpaw dipped her head in return.

"I suppose that you're going to tell me what happened to Stormpaw?"

Emberpaw looked up at the deputy, surprised at how much the she-cat could see going on in the camp.

"Icepaw and Brackenpaw attacked her out of jealousy," Emberpaw quickly summarized.

Goldenshade nodded. “Are they at the camp yet?”

“No, Adderstrike is with them,” Emberpaw explained. “He’ll probably be here in a minute.”

“Okay. Thanks, Emberpaw.” She nodded. “Don’t forget about the Gathering tonight.”

Emberpaw’s ears perked in excitement. “Am I going?” She asked.

“Of course,” the golden she-cat purred. “Why don’t you get something to eat now?”

Emberpaw nodded and bounced toward the fresh kill pile, new excitement inside her.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

Emberpaw's heart raced as she walked beside Sparrowpaw. The moon was high in the sky, full and bright, casting light upon the pines. She bounced lightly on her paws as the group of cats moved silently through the brush.

They moved through some bushes and descended a slope. Emberpaw pushed past some branches, revealing a brilliant cluster of shimmery white water. An island full of pelts and chatter sat in the middle of it all.

Sparrowpaw guided her down to the shoreline, and he hopped up onto a slippery log. "Come across this way," He beckoned with his tail for her to follow.

Emberpaw bounded over the wet log, plunging into the warm sand beyond.

"ShadowClan is finally here," A silky voice rang across the island. Leaping from a tall oak, a cream color she-cat with light patches crossed over to Darkstar.

"Applestar," He mewed. "It's nice to see you again."

"Applestar is ThunderClan's leader. Of course, you know Minnowstar of RiverClan. WindClan's leader is Ashstar." Sparrowpaw nodded to a silver she-cat with clear blue eyes.

Emberpaw nodded and moved around the island a bit. Sparrowpaw stood next to her and nudged her into a group of apprentices.

"Hey, guys. This is my friend, Emberpaw."

The cats examined her carefully, and one of the cats gave her a slight smile.

Emberpaw's eyes skimmed over the group before resting on a familiar face; a sleek silver tom with amber eyes. He seemed to recognize her too, and he sat up a little straighter. He was the tom from RiverClan that had basically ripped off her pelt and tried to drown her only a few days ago.

"I'm Streakpaw," He dipped his head.

Emberpaw felt a surge of anger, but remembered instantly that he had let her go instead of tearing her ears off. "Nice to meet you," She nodded. "Well, meet you properly."

"What? Have you two met before?" Sparrowpaw nudged her and winked.

Emberpaw glanced at Sparrowpaw. "It's not like that." She mewed. "I crossed the border on accident and he attacked me."

Sparrowpaw snorted. "Did you chase him off his own territory?" He teased.

"Well, no… He won," Emberpaw sat close to Sparrowpaw as the other cats gave her odd glances.

"So, Blossompaw, did you pass your assessment?" Sparrowpaw asked a mottled brown tabby she-cat.

"It's not Blossompaw anymore; I'm a warrior now," She purred.

"Then why are you still hanging out with us?" A black and white tom asked.

"Don't be mouse-brained, Patchpaw. I'm still your friend, warrior or apprentice." The she-cat meowed.

A hush fell over the groups of cats clustered together to keep warm in the night chill as Ashstar's tail tip flicked in annoyance.

Then, Applestar stepped up to speak first. "This moon, we have two new kits in the nursery, and plenty of prey. Wrenfeather has given birth to Moonkit and Stemkit!"

Praise and compliments ran through the crowd.

“ThunderClan also has a new apprentice, Robinpaw.”

The cats in the clearing looked about, cheering the name. A red tabby tom was sitting with his ears perked and his chest out.

Ashstar went next. “WindClan is faring well.” She nodded. “We have a new warrior; Blossomheather,” The she-cat smiled.

The she-cat’s name was chanted throughout the island.

The she-cat stepped back, and Darkstar stepped forward.

“The prey is running well in ShadowClan,” He nodded. “We have three apprentices close to being warriors, and three new apprentices; Shadepaw, Blackpaw, and Emberpaw.”

The names were chanted through the hollow. Emberpaw sat up straighter and her eyes reflected the moonlight as she searched for her brothers in the crowd; Blackpaw had also come, despite his wrenched shoulder.

Darkstar continued before she could find them. “One of our queens, Mintfoot, is expecting kits any day now, so we’ll have more apprentices on the way.”

The black tom stepped back, and the broad tabby leader of RiverClan took his place. “My clan is doing well, but for the lack of river water. Ever since the drought in Greenleaf, when none of you helped us, we’ve been having trouble with prey. While you all continue to hunt peacefully, RiverClan is starving. And it’s all because of your selfishness.”

Yowls broke from the crowd. “You’re making us seem weak, Minnowstar!” One she-cat screeched.

“We were ambushed and attacked! Is that what you call asking politely?” Emberpaw was shocked to hear Dusktide hiss louder than all the others; it was true, he had been on the patrol that had dashed back to camp, injured and wide-eyed.

“Stop arguing and listen,” Minnowstar spat. “I don’t care about what levels I went to get more territory. It is my job to keep my clan fed. How can I do that with the river drying up? But, whatever, it doesn’t matter anymore. Greenleaf is over now. When there’s something wrong in your clans, I’ll make sure that I don’t help you.”

“Always Minnowstar to ruin a Gathering,” Streakpaw growled at his leader.

Cats immediately parted the crowd as the tabby leapt down. ThunderClan filed from the clearing after Applestar, and WindClan hurried off, back to the moorlands. Darkstar quickly assembled his Clan, and with that, they set off, with Minnowstar seething behind them.

“That was short,” Emberpaw whispered to Sparrowpaw.

“You usually get to socialize more at the beginning and end, but as you can see, Minnowstar made that impossible,” Sparrowpaw’s tail rested on her back as they made their way back to camp.

“How was it?” Stormpaw’s voice was the first to break through the tight silence between the cats.

“It was the usual.” Ravenpaw responded from behind Emberpaw.

Emberpaw watched Stormpaw as her sister moved to sit beside her. There was an icy tension between the two she-cats, probably because Stormpaw now had a scar over one eye and other wounds around her shoulders.

Exhaustion finally filled Emberpaw, and she staggered to her den, collapsing in her nest and finally sleeping.

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“Cherryheart!”

Emberpaw woke as soon as she heard the cry. She hopped to her paws and looked out of the den.

It had been a half moon since the Gathering, and already, snow was falling from the sky. She shivered as she glanced around the clearing for her bossy mentor.

Tigerlily brushed past her and raced for the camp entrance in long strides. She disappeared outside before appearing once more, dragging a wounded she-cat behind her.

Emberpaw stretched her paws and padded over to Maplefur, Stormflash, and Icefrond. The she-cats were nervous and Emberpaw's fur pricked.

"What happened to Cherryheart?" Emberpaw asked.

"She was hit by a monster," Stormflash answered. "We were by RiverClan territory and then a patrol appeared out of nowhere."

"Did you fight them?"

"Yeah, and Cherryheart was in the middle of fighting when she leapt off the cat, right as a monster ran past." Icefrond explained.

Emberpaw stared at the two warriors in horror. "Is she okay?"

"We'll see," Darkstar's calm voice responded. Emberpaw turned to see him leap down beside them. "For now, can you find Goldenshade for me?" He asked Maplefur.

"Right away." The brown she-cat nodded and walked away. She then shoved her head in the warriors' den.

"Stormflash, Icefrond, go get something to eat." Darkstar ordered. The two littermates nodded and moved away.

"You may have to get a new mentor, Emberpaw," Darkstar mewed. "Are you okay with that?"

Emberpaw nodded immediately, and then regretted it. "I'm fine with it. It seems like she doesn't really want to train me."

Darkstar curled his tail over his paws. "I'm sure that's not true." He mused. "Although, you don't seem to be getting along well. Is

something wrong with her?"

Emberpaw shrugged. "When she was supposed to be giving me a tour, she sat down to groom herself and told me to go on my own." She meowed.

Darkstar dipped his head. "Don't worry about it too much. She's your Clanmate, and she knows what she was doing. Maybe she's just lazy."

With that, the tom padded away.

Emberpaw approached the medicine cat's den. The clearing around her was loud; a few cats crowded the entrance to see what had happened, including Stonekit and Leafkit.

"Featherfall is probably looking for you two." She crossed over to the two kits. They were a lot larger than she remembered them. "Where's Birdkit?"

Instantly, a cream-and-white she-cat collided with Emberpaw's tail. Emberpaw turned and wrenched her tail away. Birdkit stared up at her with disappointment.

Emberpaw smirked and moved her tail back and forth, taunting the kit. She watched as Birdkit dropped into a crouch and stalked forward slowly, low to the ground. Emberpaw was impressed at how easy it was for Birdkit to hunt her prey.

Birdkit leapt with a squeak, and Emberpaw lashed her tail away. The she-cat laughed and tumbled after it.

"Emberpaw, Birdkit!"

A warrior called Pebbletooth crossed the clearing with another tom called Sharpfang. "Now isn't the time to be playing," Pebbletooth meowed. "Cherryheart was hurt pretty badly, I've heard."

Emberpaw watched as Tigerlily's orange tail raised to silence the crowd. "I've done all I can to help her, but she's with StarClan now."

Pebbletooth pushed forward. “Are you saying she’s dead?”

Tigerlily bowed her head. “She’s lost too much blood,” The medicine cat breathed.

Emberpaw’s heart pounded as Birdkit shuffled closer to her, her eyes wide with fear.

The crowd dispersed and Tigerlily laid Cherryheart’s body in the center of the clearing. The russet warrior’s eyes were shut tightly, and Emberpaw suddenly felt sick. Her head swayed as she moved to the apprentices’ den.

Goldenshade yowled to catch the cats’ attention. “We will continue to grieve for Cherryheart,” She dipped her head. “But patrols and training must continue. I will arrange them in a moment.”

Darkstar leapt atop his den, onto the branch he addressed the clan from. “Emberpaw, since your mentor has passed, I want to give you a new one immediately. I have watched this cat, and he is ready to take on an apprentice. Brackenblaze, you will now be mentor to Emberpaw.”

Brackenblaze turned to her with a challenging and reproachful look in his eyes. He clearly hadn’t forgotten her witnessing what he’d done to Stormflash.

Emberpaw lightly touched her nose to his ear before backing away. She’d been given another terrible mentor? She looked up to Darkstar, but he had already leapt from the branch.

“Brackenblaze, Emberpaw, you’re on hunting patrol with Sunfade, Adderstrike, and Sparrowpaw.”

Emberpaw’s heart leapt with excitement. She and Sparrowpaw had gotten to work with each other a lot in the past half moon. But Sparrowpaw was only a moon and a half away from his warrior assessment.

Sparrowpaw and Adderstrike made their way over, while the regal golden tabby with the fluffy pelt was nowhere to be found. Brackenblaze moved to the warriors’ den and poked his nose inside.

“Hey, Emberpaw, I’m sorry about your mentor.” Sparrowpaw meowed to her.

She glanced up at him. “It’s alright,” She said in a lower voice. “She wasn’t a good mentor, just a good Clanmate.”

Sparrowpaw’s long tail flicked her ear, and Sunfade finally joined them. The patrol set off into the dark pines.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

Emberpaw knew that something was about to go very wrong when she stepped into the silence of the forest.

"Where's the prey?" Sparrowpaw mewed, half-joking.

Sunfade and the other two warriors thought nothing of it. "You might have to go and look for it." Sunfade disappeared into the pines.

Brackenblaze nodded to Emberpaw. "Try and catch something, and meet me here. Cherryheart did teach you the crouches, right?"

Emberpaw nodded, although it wasn't entirely true. Sparrowpaw had taught her the crouches when she was a kit.

Emberpaw bushed her fur against a cold breeze and moved into an area of dense trees. She scented the air for prey, but a different scent hung in the air.

Behind her, Sparrowpaw's fur was on end. "Dog scent," He whispered.

An ear-splitting bark came from behind them. Two large dogs stood behind them, before breaking into a run.

Sparrowpaw sprinted away, and Emberpaw hurried to keep up with him. Her paws fell into a rhythm once more, and she forgot she was even running until louder barks behind her startled her.

Emberpaw looked around for Sparrowpaw, but he was nowhere to be seen. She slowed to a trot and looked over her shoulder; the dogs weren't there, either.

Suddenly, a dog exploded from the bushes. Emberpaw yowled and shot up a nearby tree, eyes wide with fear.

The dog scrambled at the bottom, and leapt at the lowermost branches, barking and spitting. Emberpaw turned and clambered up higher, skidding down the trunk of the tree. She hooked her claws in and moved upward, not knowing how to climb trees.

There was an angry yowl, and Adderstrike and Brackenblaze leapt for the dog. Adderstrike sunk his teeth in the dog's ear, and Brackenblaze bit down hard on the dog's leg. The dog cried out on pain as Adderstrike ripped at its ear, and Brackenblaze moved to bite its tail. The dog shook Adderstrike off, and the warrior landed, winded.

But the dog was already bolting away, howling and barking.

Emberpaw watched as Adderstrike climbed to his paws. Brackenblaze moved toward the tree and glanced up at her. "Do you need help getting down?"

"I'm okay." She unhooked her claws and skidded down the trunk, landing beside Brackenblaze, who didn't seem as mean as she'd originally thought.

Sunfade's yowl of distress caused the larger toms to leap away. Emberpaw wondered if she should follow them. But, seeing the way that they easily took down the other dog, she followed.

This dog was broad, with bloody scars all over his face, still bleeding. Sunfade was crouched on a tree branch, and clinging to a branch below him was Sparrowpaw. Blood dripped from the branch quickly, and Emberpaw's breath caught in her throat.

Adderstrike watched the dog leap toward him before dodging and spinning. The dog, unprepared, turned its head as Adderstrike landed on his back, sinking his claws in the dog's long fur and biting down on its shoulder. Sunfade leapt from the tree, landing with force on the dog, whose legs caved in from under it. Sunfade raked his claws down the dog's spine.

Brackenblaze moved over to the tree. "Emberpaw, come and help me get him down," He beckoned to Sparrowpaw.

Emberpaw ran over and looked up. "How are we going to do this?" She asked.

"Climb up there and push him off the branch. I'll catch him."

Emberpaw glanced at Brackenblaze questioningly but obeyed. She clambered up the tree and walked out on the branch. At the end, Sparrowpaw was clutching the branch with his eyes shut. Three long claw marks ran from his ear down to the bottom of his head.

"Sparrowpaw," She mewed. "Are you okay?"

There was no response from the tabby and white apprentice.

Emberpaw gripped his scruff and hooked her claws into the branch. She used a lot of strength to drag him over the branch, and only froze when she saw his back leg; mauled and bleeding.

"Emberpaw, come on, it'll be fine."

Emberpaw moved him over so that he was dangling from the branch. Unable to hold him anymore, she let go.

Brackenblaze kept to his word and leapt up. The tom landed slumped on his back. Emberpaw climbed down from the tree, leaping down the last fox-length and racing over. "Will he be okay?"

"I'm not a medicine cat," Brackenblaze laid him down on the ground and examined him. "I can't tell where he's bleeding from."

Emberpaw gasped. "Brackenblaze, it's obvious," She whispered. She removed Sparrowpaw's tail from where it had curled over; a long, nasty gash through his stomach.

Brackenblaze winced and Adderstrike, who'd chased the dog away, gripped him carefully by the scruff, placing him on Sunblaze's back. "Let's go," He ordered, and the patrol set off back to camp.

When they reached the hollow, cats with worried faces were gathered in the clearing. "We heard the barking," Icefrond mewed to Brackenblaze.

"Why didn't you send help?" Emberpaw hissed. "Sparrowpaw is really hurt!"

Brackenblaze looked down at her, and opened his mouth, maybe to scold her. But he didn't. Instead, he turned to Goldenshade. "Why didn't you send help?"

She met his gaze. "It seemed like you had it under control," She meowed. "There was only a little barking."

"There was only a little screaming of pain from your Clanmates, too." Emberpaw mewed defensively.

She turned away and headed for the medicine cat den. "Ravenpaw," She peeked her head inside the apprentices' den. Sure enough, Ravenpaw was crouched there. Her brown eyes glowed in the dark.

"Is anyone hurt?" She inquired.

Emberpaw's mouth dried. She nodded. "Your brother," She whispered finally.

Ravenpaw's eyes widened. She shoved past Emberpaw and ran for the medicine cat's den.

Emberpaw followed her and watched as she shoved through the crowd outside. She tried to follow, but no cat moved to make space for her, and she backed up to wait for the news.

There was a hollow feeling in her belly. Sparrowpaw was her best friend. If he died, then she would long to see him again for a long time.

Tigerlily or Ravenpaw did not emerge from the den. A few of the cats were called to patrol and the crowd grew smaller.

Emberpaw waited longer than the other cats. She finally moved to go in the den, but Ravenpaw thrust her back. "No visitors," The black she-cat meowed. "Tigerlily's order..."

"Is he doing any better?" Grayfern asked from outside the den.

Tigerlily didn't respond, and Emberpaw's heart seemed to twist.

The sky darkened by the time that Tigerlily left her den. The plump she-cat went to the prey pile, and Emberpaw, who was still waiting to hear if Sparrowpaw was okay, sprinted over to her.

"Did you help him?" Emberpaw asked.

She nodded. "I've done all I can do." She answered.

"Does that mean he'll live?"

"Most likely, he will. I was able to stop the bleeding and I used up the rest of the comfrey to prevent any infection." She rested her tail on Emberpaw's shoulder. "Would you like to share some prey with me?"

Emberpaw nodded, and the orange she-cat smiled warmly. "Pick something out, then."

Emberpaw scanned the small pile; since her patrol had gotten no hunting done, there were only five pieces of prey left. She picked out a large crow and Tigerlily led her to sit beside the nursery.

Inside, Emberpaw heard talking amongst Birdkit, Stonekit, and Leafkit. She wondered when Mintfoot was going to have her kits; they were long overdue.

Emberpaw took a bite of the crow, and Tigerlily did too. They ate in silence until the crow was nothing but feathers.

Tigerlily suddenly stood and moved a paw into the pile of feathers. She pulled back a feather, but it was white. The tips were red with blood.

Emberpaw looked to Tigerlily for an explanation, but the she-cat was staring into the stars.

After a few minutes, she turned to Emberpaw. "It's a sign from StarClan, but right now, I can't be sure what it means." She sighed. "Perhaps they will talk to me in a dream."

Tigerlily gripped the white feather in her jaws. "You can take the rest of them for your nest if you want," She nodded. "They aren't very soft, but they'll keep you warm."

"Thank you." Emberpaw gripped a bunch of feathers in her jaws and brought them to the den. She stepped over Blackpaw and spread them around the edges of Sparrowpaw's moss den instead. She curled up in her own den to sleep.

****

"Emberpaw,"

Emberpaw grunted as Shadepaw nudged her. "We're going to battle train today," He whispered. "Come on!"

Emberpaw climbed to her paw and groomed her pelt quickly before stepping over Blackpaw again and leaving the den. She was met by Longclaw and Brackenblaze, who led the way out of the clearing.

Shadepaw walked beside her quietly. "So, did you see what happened to Sparrowpaw?" He mewed quietly.

"I was on the patrol, mouse-brain," Emberpaw mewed, trying to sound friendly. Her brothers hadn't spoken to her in a long time, and she felt more alone when they ignored her.

"Well, I'm glad you're okay," Shadepaw offered.

Emberpaw purred. "Thanks," She smiled.

"But I'm still going to crush you in the training clearing." He bounded after his mentor.

Emberpaw rolled her eyes and caught up to the rest of the cats.

Once in the clearing, Longclaw explained a game to them.

"This stick is, say, a piece of stolen prey. It will be located on the other side of this line." Longclaw clawed out a long line and continued to talk while he did so. "Both teams will have a stick that they need to defend. One cat on each team will defend, and the

other will try and get the other side's stick. Ambersap and her apprentice will join us later, and so will Maplefur and hers."

Emberpaw flexed her claws and bounced. This game actually sounded interesting.

"Okay. We'll mix up the teams after this game, but right now you'll each be on a team with your mentor."

Longclaw threw one stick at Emberpaw. She pushed it over the dirt ground to Brackenblaze, who moved it to the edge of the clearing. He moved back over to her.

"Do you want to be defense or offense?"

"Defense," She meowed.

"Okay." He nodded. "You know what to do."

Brackenblaze crouched beside her. "Are you ready?" He called over to Longclaw.

The black and white tom nodded.

"Go!"

Brackenblaze shot across the clearing, faster than Longclaw, who was bounding toward the line. Brackenblaze leapt away from Longclaw, who tried to attack him, and headed for Shadepaw on the other side.

Longclaw continued to run toward her. She crouched down and sprang at him. He leapt up and collided with her in midair, and being heavier, brought her on her back to the ground. Winded, she twisted to her paws as Longclaw shot past, the stick in his jaws.

Emberpaw dashed after him, curving her spine so that she was using longer strides. She quickly outpaced him and turned around, lunging at his shoulders.

Surprised, Longclaw dodged to the side. But she turned just as quickly and sprang after him, cuffing his legs with a paw so that he

fell forward.

Emberpaw stood on his back and wrenched the stick from his jaws. She leapt off and returned it to her base just as Brackenblaze arrived, a stick proudly clenched in his jaws.

"Good job, Emberpaw." Longclaw praised.

"Shadepaw did excellent as well." Brackenblaze told the older warrior.

Shadepaw approached the line with his head held high.

"Now, Shadepaw, I want you on Emberpaw's team. Try using that move that I taught you yesterday."

Shadepaw nodded and Brackenblaze switched sides with him.

"I'll be defense again," Shadepaw meowed. "You can be offense. Maybe when the other cats get here, you can sneak over the line while the others are distracted."

"If only there was some cover in this clearing." She meowed.

Shadepaw took his place by the stick and Emberpaw crouched down.

"Go!" Longclaw called.

Emberpaw raced forward. Once again, she sprinted as hard as possible, her paws barely touching the ground as she leaped forward. She quickly bunched her haunches beneath her and sprang off them, leaping straight over Longclaw, who was playing offense. She raced over the other side and leapt into the air, putting all her weight on her forepaws as she met Brackenblaze.

Pushing with her weight, she drove her shoulder into his chest, and he fell backwards, landing on his back. She triumphantly yowled as she pinned him.

Brackenblaze looked up at her, surprised and dazed. She leapt off him and snatched the stick before he could get up. Then, she darted

over the line.

"Emberpaw, help!" Shadepaw cried out.

Emberpaw saw Longclaw streaming over the thin grass and raced at him, striking him with her forepaw. He stopped and bowled her over with his shoulder before gripping his stick from her jaws and racing off with both sticks.

Emberpaw sprinted after him, and easily caught up, but they were already at the base.

"Nice game, you two." Longclaw mewed, sitting down.

Soon, Ambersap and her apprentice Ravenpaw joined them, along with Blackpaw and Maplefur. Emberpaw excitedly flexed her claws as the game began. She was on a team with Brackenblaze, Shadepaw, and Ambersap. There were two defenses, Brackenblaze and Ambersap, and two offenses, her and her brother.

"Go!" Longclaw called from the other side.

Emberpaw streaked forward and took note of Shadepaw's plan. He met with Blackpaw in the center of the clearing, while Emberpaw stuck to the outside of the clearing and Longclaw, the other offense of the other team, saw an easy path to the stick and lunged forward.

Emberpaw edged forward as Shadepaw broke away from Blackpaw and raced for the defense. He met with both Maplefur and Ravenpaw.

Emberpaw broke into a full sprint. She was silent on her paws and quicker than any of the others. She dashed behind Maplefur and Ravenpaw and gripped the stick while they fought with Shadepaw.

Maplefur immediately noticed her orange and white pelt streaking back over to her side. The brown she-cat raced after her, and Emberpaw noticed that she was pretty fast. Emberpaw slowed and dropped back so that Maplefur was halting in front of her.

Emberpaw leapt at the warrior. The she-cat moved backwards so that Emberpaw landed a tail length in front of her, and then she

cuffed Emberpaw on the face. Emberpaw jumped backwards, pretending to be weak and scared.

There was a flash of pride in Maplefur's eyes. She leapt for Emberpaw and gripped the stick in her mouth, trying to pull it out.

Emberpaw gripped the stick and pulled backwards as hard as she could, flinging Maplefur onto her stomach. She clenched the stick harder and pinned Maplefur down on her stomach in the dirt.

She then let the she-cat up. Emberpaw raced toward the other side, where Brackenblaze and Ambersap were fighting off the two offenses.

Maplefur's paw landed on her tail. Emberpaw spun and lashed out at the she-cat's muzzle.

Maplefur yelped in pain as claws raked her nose and down her muzzle. "Stupid half-clan apprentice!" She spat out blood and raked her own claws on Emberpaw's muzzle.

Emberpaw winced and spat out the stick. She'd heard the word half-clan before, when she was a kit and the guard, whom she now recognized as a warrior called Hawkflight, had told her something.

"It means you don't belong here."

Emberpaw stared at Maplefur and backed up.

"Maplefur, there's no need to be so rude. It was an accident." Brackenblaze was saying, but Emberpaw wasn't listening. Instead, she leapt from the clearing and disappeared into the trees.

She needed to be alone. After all, she didn't belong in ShadowClan.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

Emberpaw sat in the shade of a pine, her head on her paws. She couldn't believe how angry Maplefur had been, and not just because she had accidentally unsheathed her claws. It was also because she was half-clan.

"Half-clan isn't the word to describe it. Maybe quarter-clan," Emberpaw murmured to herself. She understood that her dad was from RiverClan and ShadowClan. It was because his parents had broken the warrior code. And Emberpaw's mother, Flameheat, was ThunderClan and WindClan.

"That's why I'm so fast, and I know how to swim." Emberpaw mused. "And I'm also silent on my paws and can hunt at night. That's ShadowClan's part."

She thought about ThunderClan's part. "Maybe I can fight and hunt in brambles," She muttered.

"Emberpaw!"

She turned her head to see Brackenblaze push past some pine branches and make his way over to her.

"Look, you need to go back to train. I know what Maplefur said, but she was just angry at you. Besides, you probably need to get that scratch looked at."

Emberpaw shook her head. "I'm fine, and I don't need it to be looked at." She hissed before standing up and following Brackenblaze to the training clearing.

Emberpaw leapt down into the clearing. Maplefur gave her a glare from the far side of the clearing.

"Let's continue. Emberpaw and Ravenpaw, switch sides."

Emberpaw flicked her tail and crossed over to sit next to Blackpaw. He rudely moved away from her, and Emberpaw glanced at him. The dark tabby refused to look at her.

"Okay. Blackpaw and I will be the offense," Longclaw mewed. "Maplefur and Emberpaw, you stay here and are the defense."

Maplefur rolled her eyes. "Fine," Emberpaw meowed.

"We're ready!" Brackenblaze called from the other side.

"Go!" Longclaw meowed.

Emberpaw, who was getting tired of the training, sat down and licked her dirty paws.

"Hey, Emberpaw, it isn't time for you to wash yourself." Maplefur hissed.

"I can do what I want," She replied calmly.

"Not on my time."

Emberpaw turned to Maplefur, her eyes blazing. "Will you leave me alone?" She hissed.

"Why should I, Emberpaw?" Maplefur asked. "You don't belong in ShadowClan, though I bet that ThunderClan will take you in."

Emberpaw stood up. "Do you want to talk to my claws about this?" She threatened.

"I'm not scared of you, Emberpaw." The she-cat replied smoothly.

"Well, you should be." Emberpaw unsheathed her claws and launched herself onto her Clanmate.

The she-cat yowled and claws struck Emberpaw's pelt as she landed in front of Maplefur. Emberpaw twisted away and leapt on top of Maplefur's back. Her leg splayed to the side as she collapsed, and the she-cat cried out.

Emberpaw slid her claws out all the way and raked them down the she-cat's back. Maplefur flung her away, and Emberpaw righted herself and charged again.

"Emberpaw, Maplefur!" Ambersap's disgusted voice rang around the clearing. But Emberpaw, driven by fury, shoved Maplefur back with her shoulder and put all her weight on her, shoving her back. She held her down with a paw on her throat, and raked her other paw down the she-cat's stomach.

Maplefur wailed and a flash of red fur crossed Emberpaw's vision. Suddenly, a forceful blow connected with the side of her head, throwing her backwards. Emberpaw landed in a pile a few feet away and continue to lie on the ground to catch her breath. She could feel blood drying in her fur where the blow was made.

"Emberpaw, sooner or later, you'll be making enemies. Control your anger," Ambersap's scolding overcame the noise of her heart pounding in her head.

Emberpaw opened her eyes and Brackenblaze gripped her scruff, pulling her onto her paws. "Emberpaw, Maplefur, get back to camp," He ordered. "Make sure to see Tigerlily."

Emberpaw looked at her paws. The medicine cat was already busy with Sparrowpaw. She didn't want to have to go in there because she had attacked her own Clanmate.

But the blow to her head had left bloody claw marks, and she wanted to be treated. And after all, it wasn't all her. If Maplefur hadn't been so mean to her...

"Emberpaw! Let's go!" Brackenblaze snarled.

The orange and white she-cat nodded and leapt out of the training clearing, her eyes watery.

When she got back to camp, it was loud with excitement. Cats were gathered outside the nursery, meaning that Mintfoot must've had her kits.

Emberpaw sat down, away from the crowd of waiting kits, and was

immediately confronted by Sparrowpaw.

"What happened?" He glanced at the claw marks on the side of her face.

Emberpaw didn't dare meet his gaze. "It was my fault." She stated. "How are your wounds healing?"

"Don't mind my wounds; what do you mean, it was your fault?"

Emberpaw looked up and saw Maplefur wincing at every step she took. "I attacked Maplefur," She croaked.

Sparrowpaw gaped. "Why?" He meowed.

"She was taunting me." Emberpaw huffed.

"Emberpaw, talk to me! What really happened?" Sparrowpaw was getting impatient now.

Emberpaw turned her head and looked at him. His eyes were wide in horror.

She stood up. Ambersap was right; she was making enemies. Sparrowpaw must've thought that she was dangerous.

"Emberpaw, don't leave. Tell me what happened. Please," He mewed, more calmly.

Emberpaw sighed. "She said I don't belong here. And she was right. I don't belong in any of the clans."

"Is this because you're half-clan?" He asked.

"Not half-clan. I have blood from all the clans. ShadowClan doesn't like that."

Sparrowpaw's scent washed over her as his pelt brushed hers. "Wouldn't that mean that you belong in all the clans, instead of none of them?"

Emberpaw shook her head. "No. Nobody wants the kin of so many

warriors who weren't loyal."

Sparrowpaw's gaze burned into her fur when she looked away. "So Maplefur said you didn't belong here. And you managed to defeat her?"

Emberpaw smiled slightly. "Yeah." She said.

"I think that's kind of cool. You took on a larger, more experienced warrior and you won."

"She wasn't prepared for her Clanmate to rip her pelt off." Emberpaw remarked.

"No, but a warrior should be prepared for anything."

Emberpaw, surprised, glanced up at the speaker. Darkstar stood there, dying sunlight gleaming on his pelt.

"Did you hear what I did?" She asked numbly. The black tom nodded.

"Am I in trouble?" She asked.

"You'll probably need some type of punishment, but I think you should continue to train as a fighter. You proved your skill today, even if you did attack your Clanmate. You should know that you are needed by your Clan, and you are wanted here."

Sparrowpaw purred in agreement. "Emberpaw, you're like my best friend. I think it's cool that you have blood from all the clans. It's probably a first."

Emberpaw stared at the clan leader. "Thanks, Darkstar." She meowed.

The leader nodded and padded away.

She turned to Sparrowpaw. "So, are you okay from the dog attack?"

"Yeah. I still have a few scars, and my back leg needs to heal, so I won't be out of camp in the next half moon."

"That's okay. I'll probably be right beside you when Darkstar gives me my punishment."

Sparrowpaw purred in amusement and met her gaze. "Maybe I'll get to train with you longer, then." He mewed.

Emberpaw's face got hot. She did her best to hide her embarrassment and stared back at him. "Yeah, maybe."

Sparrowpaw stood up and pressed his nose to her ear. "Well, I'll see you later then." He padded away, to the apprentices' den.

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"Emberpaw is the only one showing signs of breaking apart the Clans." Yellowfang meowed.

On her other side, Cedarstar nodded. "Darkstar, you need to be her mentor. Teach her how to control her anger."

Darkstar flicked his tail tip. "Won't the Clan suspect something is going on?"

"Would you rather tell Emberpaw's mentor that the Clans are in danger?" Yellowfang spat.

"No. But how do you even know that they can destroy the Clans?" Darkstar meowed in return.

"You saw Emberpaw yesterday. You saw what she did to that warrior. You know that she is capable of killing, if she wanted to. And she's only been an apprentice for half a moon," Cedarstar meowed.

Darkstar sighed, and dipped his head to his ancestors. "I will do my best to protect the Clans."

****

Emberpaw woke up to Darkstar's yowl. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the meeting branch!"

Emberpaw shrugged off drowsiness and pushed through the grass at the edge of the den, stifling a yawn. Sharpfang and Mothshadow moved past, eyes droopy with sleep. Dawn's pale light was just making its way through the pines. The morning seemed warmer than usual.

Hawkflight and Eaglewings sat down in front of them. The two brothers were talking eagerly, but were quickly quieted by Darkstar. "I have thought long about this decision, but I have made up my mind. Brackenblaze, you will be relieved from your mentoring duties from now on."

Confusion swept through the camp instantly.

"Have I done something wrong?" Brackenblaze mewed.

"No, not at all." He meowed. "I've decided that I'm going to train Emberpaw myself."

Beside her, Ravenpaw stiffened. "Do you think I'm in trouble?" Emberpaw mewed to her. She shrugged. "I'm not sure what he's doing this for."

Darkstar leapt from the branch and onto his den. Emberpaw watched the cats make a way for her through the crowd, and she numbly started walking toward Darkstar.

When she stood in front of his den, expecting him to come down, he only stepped back, his eyes gleaming with challenge. Emberpaw realized that it must have something to do with her heritage, and that was the reason that he switched her mentor.

She gathered her haunches beneath her easily and leapt up onto the den.

Darkstar pressed his nose to her ear. "It seems like you have some SkyClan blood beneath your pelt as well," The leader whispered in her ear before breaking away.

"This is the third mentor you've changed in this moon." Dusktide's voice broke through the crowd. "What is wrong with my daughter?"

Darkstar stared down at the tom. "Nothing is wrong with her," He mewed thickly. "But I would rather it be me to train her."

Emberpaw felt confusion rush through her, too. This was about something else, although she had no clue what.

Darkstar dismissed the crowd, and he stared at her calmly. "Your training begins tomorrow. For now, you can stay in the camp as your punishment."

Emberpaw's tail drooped, but she nodded.

She leapt off the den and Sparrowpaw met her at the bottom. "He must like you or something." He meowed.

"I'm stuck here all day. That's not exactly showing favoritism." She mewed. He only laughed.

"Hey, at least I'm here." He purred. "You can spend your whole day with me."

"Great," She teased. "I can't wait."

****

Darkstar padded through the trees and came to a stop. Rain pattered on the pine branches, and Emberpaw stiffened as a drop fell through the trees.

"Alright, let's race." He meowed. "All the way to the RiverClan border; whoever gets there first can pick what we do next."

Emberpaw stretched her back legs. "Okay," She mewed. "Be prepared to lose."

Darkstar glanced at her. "I wouldn't be so sure. You may have the agile form of a WindClan cat, but you need to train to be good at running."

Emberpaw nodded.

"Go!" The black tom yowled.

Emberpaw sprang after him through the trees. She felt a cold wind brush her pelt and watched as the tom pulled far ahead of her.

Emberpaw grunted in exasperation and fell into a rhythmic sprint. Her paws thrummed the ground as she pulled toward him. With each bound, she moved her paws out a little further until she was speeding over the pine needles, as fast as a rabbit.

Emberpaw dodged through the pines as Darkstar reappeared, moving just as fast. He leapt around the marsh, disappearing through the trees.

Emberpaw slowed to a walk. She examined the marsh. It would be way faster to navigate through it. She lunged onto a wet stone, and then another, and then another. She continued to do this until she was faced on all sides with three fox-lengths of brown water.

Emberpaw hissed at herself. She crouched down and shifted her weight until it was even. Then, she sprang off.

Emberpaw flew over the water, crashing to the other side with her forepaws landing first, and then her back paws. She fell back into her running pattern and threw herself through the pines until she reached the border.

She slowed to a halt. Darkstar wasn't there. Panting, she sat down.

After about a minute, Darkstar broke through the trees. Confusion overtook him, and then his eyes gleamed. "How did you get here so fast?"

"I went through the marsh," She explained, proud of herself.

Darkstar shook rain from his pelt. "Good job. I guess you get to pick what we do next."

Emberpaw quickly caught her breath. "Alright, how about we just go hunting?" She meowed.

"Okay. Show me what you can do." Darkstar offered.

"Maybe we could go on a patrol?" She asked, feeling uncomfortable

alone in the presence of the leader.

"Sure. Wait here and I'll go gather some cats."

"Can Sparrowpaw come?" She asked.

Darkstar shrugged. "I'll have to see how his wounds are healing." The black tom disappeared into the shadows.

"The leader left his apprentice here." Emberpaw turned her head as a few sleek cats snuck along the edge of their territory.

A gray and white she-cat laughed. "What a bad idea."

"Why are you out here with the leader, all alone?" A dark gray tom questioned her.

"He's my mentor." She responded proudly.

The tom looked at the gray and white she-cat before unsheathing his claws. "Then there must be something about you."

"What are you talking about?" Emberpaw backed away from the border.

"Last time an apprentice was mentored by a leader, it was Firestar; the cat that saved the Clans." Streakpaw meowed from beside the she-cat. A brown tabby tom sat beside him, glaring at her through amber slits.

"I don't know myself." She laughed. The cats continued to watch her strangely.

"Wait a minute; that's Dusktide's kit. I knew there was something about you." The gray tom whispered something in the she-cat's ear. She nodded.

"Well, why don't you tell me what's going on? Why is he my mentor?" Emberpaw asked.

"It's because you're half-clan. Didn't you know that?" The brown tom meowed.

Streakpaw gave Emberpaw a curious glance.

"She's half-clan? What does that have to do with anything?" Streakpaw finally asked.

"It means she has the abilities and form of other cats, meaning she has more abilities than the other apprentices." The brown tabby meowed.

"But so do my brothers," Emberpaw pointed out.

"There's only one Clan leader, you know." The she-cat pointed out.

"Hello, Stagleg, Crippleleaf." Darkstar greeted the two cats at the head of the patrol.

Crippleleaf, the she-cat, dipped her head. "Darkstar, it's nice to see you." She mewed gruffly. "We're just remarking the border."

Emberpaw watched them spray the border before they ran to the frozen river and left the cats in the pines, watching.

"Alright, Emberpaw, I brought Sparrowpaw, Ravenpaw, Ambersap, and Nightpool." He meowed. "Now, start hunting."

Sparrowpaw padded over to her as the others scattered in the dark trees. He walked with a heavy limp.

"Are you going to be okay hunting?" Emberpaw asked him.

"I'll be fine." He mewed and moved through the trees, no longer silent on his feet. Emberpaw looked on after him before following.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

“What did you name them?” Sparrowpaw darted over to Mintfoot after laying his prey on the pile. Emberpaw stiffened against a cold breeze before bringing Mintfoot a mouse that she’d just caught.

“Thanks, Emberpaw,” Mintfoot nodded. “Come and meet your kin.”

Emberpaw nodded and followed Sparrowpaw and Mintfoot inside.

Next to Tigerlily were two kits, grappling blindly in their nest. Tigerlily was keeping them warm while Mintfoot must’ve been stretching her legs.

“The little golden one is Lionkit,” Mintfoot mewed. Emberpaw immediately recognized that Sunfade was the father by the tom’s golden pelt. “And the gray tabby is Floodkit.”

Emberpaw purred as Birdkit shot out of one of the nearby nests. “I can teach them how to play mossball!” She squealed in excitement.

“You have to wait until they grow bigger.” Tigerlily fondly flicked Birdkit’s ear with her tail.

“I won’t even be in the nursery when they grow,” Stonekit boasted from behind them. Featherfall yawned from her nest. “You kits still have another moon or so,” She responded meekly.

Stonekit groaned. Emberpaw located Leafkit, who seemed to be quiet.

“Emberpaw, can we have a ride?” Stonekit meowed.

“You’re a little big for a ride,” Emberpaw laughed. “How about you ride Sparrowpaw?”

Sparrowpaw crouched down, his belly low to the ground. Birdkit

leapt onto his back, and Stonekit followed, digging his claws in tightly. Leafkit shrugged sleep off and followed them.

Sparrowpaw stood up and took the kits outside. “Don’t go far!” Featherfall called after him.

Emberpaw turned and followed him outside. The sky was becoming darker, and she was ready for sleep.

“I enjoyed hunting with you today,” Sparrowpaw meowed, padding closer to her. The kits, nearly apprentices, awkwardly clung to his back. “It felt good to get out of camp.”

“I bet so,” She mewed. She watched as Darkstar leapt down into the camp, fur ruffled by wind. He had a lot of prey to deposit on the pile. “I’m glad that we actually found some prey. It’s getting colder by the minute.” She ducked her head and left him to retire to her nest.

****

Emberpaw landed on a sun-warmed stone in a patch of golden light. She felt exhausted from a trek yesterday that Darkstar had insisted on, and today, she was hunting.

An urgent swoop of exhaustion ran through her, and she sat down for a moment.

The pines faded back, revealing grassy moorland. Cherryheart sat with her head bowed, and Emberpaw blinked, confused. “Cherryheart, where are we?”

The russet color she-cat stood up and lashed her tail. “You’re in WindClan, with me.” She meowed.

“What’s going on?” She asked.

The young warrior sighed. “Tell me what you hear.”

Emberpaw blinked in confusion and her ear swiveled. She thought she heard a cat screech carried on the wind. “I only hear the wind whipping,” She meowed, unsure of what to say.

“There’s something more. Listen harder.”

Emberpaw strained to hear what more Cherryheart spoke of.

Suddenly, a faint but unmistakable yowl hit her ears. She looked toward her former mentor. “There are cats screaming in fear,” She whispered. “Why?”

Cherryheart drew her tail around herself. “Why don’t you go and find out?” The she-cat mewed, turning away.

Emberpaw glanced at her before following the noise of the screams. She sniffed the air and caught a whiff of all the clans. Her heart pounding, she kept moving.

Just then, a cat sprang past her, not even noticing her. She watched him run and then fall, not getting up.

“What’s happening?” She called out. But no cat heard her. She peeked into what must have been WindClan’s camp. Cats fought viciously against one another, but it was obvious who was winning. Cats that looked familiar were winning; Sharpfang, Eaglewings, Ambersap, and Icefrond were all tearing their opponents apart. The cats were trying to get away, only to be leapt at and killed. ShadowClan was being merciless!

In the midst of it all was a dark tabby. She gasped and sprinted into the camp to confront her brother, but the moorland was fading. She had to know which brother to stay away from! Her eyes darted around, coming to rest on a white and orange she-cat. Could that have been her? She watched as the cat’s deft claws tore out the attacker’s throat, and gasped in horror as the cat slumped backward, dead.

“Emberpaw,” An angry yell sounded from her left.

Emberpaw blinked open her eyes to see Sharpfang staring at her. She gasped and leapt back. “Stay away from me, killer!” She spat.

Sharpfang’s eyes widened in surprise, and he crept toward her. “Are you okay? You were screaming.” He meowed.

Emberpaw hissed and unsheathed her claws. “I said, stay away from me,” Her voice cracked. She had been fighting and killing as well.

A starling flew from the pines, Mothshadow’s sharp claws snatching it. Emberpaw narrowed her eyes; the calico was probably a killer as well.

“I saw StarClan,” She blurted out.

Sharpfang turned his head. “You had a dream?” He asked.

“Cherryheart was there.” Emberpaw meowed.

Greenpine broke from the trees. “What’s going on?” She asked.

“Emberpaw needs to see Tigerlily. Go on,” He mewed as she hesitated.

Emberpaw nodded and raced back to camp.

She leapt down into the shallow dip in the earth and watched as cats peered out of their dens. Four days ago, the hunters had only been lucky, because there was a violent chill in the air and no prey to be found. They were all hungry and had no energy.

“Tigerlily,” She poked her nose into the medicine cat’s den.

The plump she-cat was standing over Ravenpaw, who was sleeping. There was a long scrape down her left flank.

The medicine cat turned her head. “What can I do for you?” She asked.

“I had a dream.” She meowed.

Tigerlily spun to face her. “Did StarClan talk to you?”

“I saw Cherryheart,” She started to say. But Tigerlily shooed her out of the den and outside, where the camp was quiet.

“Cherryheart asked me what I could hear. I heard cats screaming, and then, I ran over to them. It was WindClan, and some of our cats

were attacking. But they were killing all of them! And one of my brothers was the leader of it all, I could tell by the way some of the cats were looking up to him."

Tigerlily's gaze turned even more solemn. She nodded. "If Cherryheart was there, then it must've meant something from StarClan. I'll talk to Darkstar about it later."

"What will you tell him?" She asked.

"StarClan talks to him, too. I want to ask him if he's had any dreams lately." She meowed, concern in her voice.

Just then, Mothshadow burst into the clearing. "Tigerlily, come quickly!" She yowled.

Emberpaw's fur ruffled. She watched Tigerlily quickly leave the camp before following her at a quick pace to see what was happening.

Emberpaw had had much practice with tracking. She easily caught Tigerlily's herbal scent and followed it to the edge of ShadowClan territory, where a group of ShadowClan warriors were gathered.

"There was something chasing them," Sharpfang was explaining. "They both got caught in this metal stuff."

"That's called barbwire," Tigerlily meowed. "Twolegs put it here. These cats shouldn't have tried to get through it."

Emberpaw pushed up to the front of the crowd and saw a bloodied she-cat twisted up in metal wires. Sharp spikes protruded from the wires and were buried in two cats' skin. One of the cats was definitely dead. Her eyes were shut and a wire was tightly wrapped around her throat. Blood surrounded her.

The other cat, smaller and just a kitten, had marks all over him. The barbwire was wrapped around his stomach and side and paws so that he was hanging from them. Emberpaw stifled a cry and Tigerlily approached the cats.

"The she-cat is dead, but the kit is still alive," She mewed hoarsely.

“Mothshadow, Adderstrike, come here.”

Emberpaw watched as Tigerlily instructed them. Then, Adderstrike leaned dangerously close to the barbwires and gripped the little tom’s scruff.

“Good. Mothshadow, you know what to do.”

The calico sat down and placed a paw on the wire. The wire was only partly covered in little spikes.

Tigerlily then placed her paw on a different wire.

It took a lot of untwisting, but finally Adderstrike pulled the kit from the messy wires. Tigerlily pulled back and lapped at her bloody pads, while Mothshadow did the same.

“Are we going to take care of him?” Brokenleg asked.

“Yes, unless this kit has a family to go back to.” Adderstrike responded.

Emberpaw watched as Brokenleg and Mothshadow led the way back to camp. She followed in the back while Tigerlily carried the young tom.

“Do your paws hurt?” She asked.

Tigerlily shook her head. “There weren’t too many spikes on those wires,” She answered. “I’m glad that we found this little one.”

“How many moons old is he?” Emberpaw asked.

“He might be two.” She answered. “But I can’t be sure.”

As soon as they broke out into the camp, Tigerlily rushed to her den to stop the kit from bleeding to death. Emberpaw was met by Sparrowpaw in the clearing.

“What happened? Who is that?” The tabby asked.

“That kit got caught in some barbwire,” She meowed. “I don’t know

who he is. Maybe he's a kittypet."

"Maybe," He meowed. "He doesn't seem fat enough to be a kittypet."

Emberpaw shrugged. "I guess not."

Darkstar's scent washed over her. He appeared beside her. "Are you ready to go battle train?" He asked.

Emberpaw nodded and followed him from the clearing.

In the training clearing, Blackpaw sat. He'd grown at least another inch since the last time they'd spoken. Emberpaw noted the serious look on his face and stood in front of him.

"Hello, Darkstar." Maplefur flicked her tail tip. "Hello, Emberpaw."

Emberpaw met her hostile gaze and dipped her head. She instantly located the scars on Maplefur's stomach and hung her head.

"Today will be simple." Darkstar meowed. "Emberpaw, I'll teach you some battle moves, and Maplefur will teach Blackpaw some moves. You two will face each other and make sure to demonstrate the moves."

Emberpaw nodded, and turned to look at Blackpaw. He'd stood up, his claws digging in the dirt.

Darkstar nudged her away from him.

He showed her two moves that were more challenging then she had anticipated. "Now, you cuff the two legs in the back, and land your paw on his shoulder," Darkstar meowed.

Emberpaw nodded. "Those moves seem pretty hard," She mewed.

"You have the form and agility of other Clans. I have to make things a little bit challenging."

Emberpaw dipped her head.

“But just remember, Blackpaw also may be taught challenging things.” She looked up at him to see him glancing over at Blackpaw, uncertainty gleaming in his eyes.

“Are you finished?” Maplefur asked.

“Yes.” Darkstar nodded.

Blackpaw stretched his legs and faced Emberpaw, a challenging glint in his eyes.

“Go ahead,” Maplefur mewed.

Emberpaw dodged to the side, and Blackpaw flew past her with force. She twisted and leapt, turning onto her back and sliding under her brother. Quickly, she battered his belly with her paws and pulled herself to her paws, bucking him off.

Blackpaw landed easily, turning to face her paw for paw. Instantly, he thrust her back to the ground. “This is for wrenching my shoulder,” He hissed, sudden hatred burning in his blue eyes. His claws struck her face, and she winced but fought back, sending a sharp blow between his eyes. “Keep your claws in, Blackpaw!” She spat.

The tabby leapt back and let her up before leaping past her. He spun quicker than she’d thought he would and landed on her shoulders. Her legs wobbled and she crashed to the ground. Maplefur had shown him easy battle moves. It was time to use hers.

Emberpaw twisted away from her brother and sprang away, making it look like she was fleeing to recover. But before he’d even turned, she spun and charged back toward him, swiping a paw under him. She hit his legs to the side and he hit the ground, hard.

Emberpaw landed a paw on his shoulder and pulled the rest of her on top of him. Panting, she sunk her claws in a little before pushing off and grooming her ears and face.

“You win this time, Emberpaw. But just remember, I am your worst enemy in combat.” The dark tabby crouched down; stalking her like she was prey.

“Apparently, you aren’t.” She mewed proudly.

Darkstar dipped his head. “Good job today,” He meowed. “Let’s get back to camp.”

The jet black tom leapt from the clearing and headed back to camp.

Blackpaw stood next to Maplefur and talked to her in a low voice as they returned to camp. She trailed along behind them silently.

Her thoughts returned to the dream she’d had. What if Blackpaw was the leader? He sure didn’t deserve to lead them if she could beat him in combat.

What am I thinking? I would never want to be the leader of that group of cats. Emberpaw stiffened. *But I was there, too. I was a killer…* Emberpaw fluffed out her pelt and raced back to camp, suddenly scared of her future.

I just want to be a good warrior. Is that too much to ask?

She looked to the sky for her answer, but got none.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

“Lionkit,” Emberpaw heard the wail all the way across the clearing. “Lionkit, wake up!”

Emberpaw saw cats crowding the den and continued to pick moss from under her claws. She watched as Tigerlily emerged from the den and drew the cats back, a look of annoyance on her face. She then disappeared back into the nursery.

A slow minute passed. Then, Tigerlily emerged from the den. “Lionkit has starved to death,” She mewed solemnly.

Sunfade leapt over to the nursery and disappeared inside.

Emberpaw winced at the hunger clutching her belly. Famine had struck all of the ShadowClan cats after a heavy freeze. Emberpaw watched as Greenpine moved past her. She could practically count the ribs on the black she-cat.

Just then, Pebbletooth led the hunting patrol through the thorn tunnel and into the camp. There was a defeated look on his face, and his tail dragged in the snowmelt behind him. Grayfern and Paleleaf followed him, their eyes dull with exhaustion. Ravenpaw pushed through the brambles, carrying a scrawny mouse. She took it to the nursery.

Sparrowpaw limped into the camp after her. He carried with him a large rabbit.

“How’d you manage to catch that?” Emberpaw’s mouth watered as Brokenleg called out.

“It was pure luck,” He answered. “Paleleaf chased it right into my paws.”

“I wish that the prey would come out.” Longclaw sighed. Beside

him, Hawkflight nodded his agreement, his head rested on his paws.

Grayfern crossed the clearing as Sparrowpaw dragged the rabbit to the nursery. Emberpaw watched in anguish, and Grayfern gave her a sorrowful look.

Goldenshade moved from the warriors' den. "We have to keep trying." She meowed. Her voice was laced with fatigue. "Hawkflight, Mothshadow, Blackpaw, Emberpaw, and Eaglewings," She turned her head. "Can you please go hunting?"

Emberpaw found the energy to stand and crossed the clearing to where Mothshadow reluctantly had gotten to her paws. Blackpaw's tail briefly rested on her shoulder in reassurance, and Mothshadow led the way from the camp.

Emberpaw was surprised that her brother hadn't been snarky as usual. His blue eyes were droopy as he trudged through the pines. *He must be so asleep that he doesn't even want to be rude to me*, Emberpaw thought.

Emberpaw looked out into the silent forest. She was determined to feed some of the cats in her Clan, even if it meant searching for the rest of the day. She trotted forward, silent on her paws. No cat spoke, as if not wanting to scare away any imaginary prey that might be dwelling between the trees.

Hawkflight looked up as a tiny songbird chattered. He saw it in the tree and licked his lips.

Emberpaw glanced at the bird in annoyance. He was all the way up in that tree! How could she hunt it from there?

Just then, she unsheathed her claws. It was time for her ThunderClan heritage to really kick in. "I'll get it," She whispered. Before anyone could retort, she lunged at the trunk of the tree and sunk her claws in.

She forced herself upward before sinking her claws into the branch. The pine instantly bobbed under her weight, and the bird took off.

Emberpaw rushed after it, leaping from the branch and swatting it from the air. She felt a rush of terror as she crashed through the tree branches below her. She landed on a firmer lower branch, her pads itching with fear.

“She got it!” Mothshadow gripped the tiny bird in her jaws.

Emberpaw righted herself and leapt down from the tree. “It’s nothing to get excited about,” Eaglewings remarked as she followed them through the trees.

“It’s more prey than most of the cats on the other patrol caught.” Mothshadow defended, her voice being muffled by the prey.

“Let’s split up.” Hawkflight suggested. “Eaglewings, come with me. Mothshadow, go with Blackpaw and Emberpaw.” The brown tom flexed his claws.

“I’ll be fine on my own.” Emberpaw meowed, and veered from the clearing into the dense pine forest.

Somewhere nearby, an owl called. Emberpaw wondered if she could ever catch one, and if her Clanmates would ever consider eating it. She shrugged the thought away; the owl was probably her size or bigger.

The rest of the hunt was nearly unsuccessful. Emberpaw headed toward the marsh after she found nothing more in the trees. Disappointment coursed through her. She had wanted to be the hero of her Clan… And thinking more about her dream, not be the help to destroy the others.

Emberpaw halted in her tracks as she noticed a fat frog hopping around the edge of the marsh. One wrong move and it would jump into the murky water, leaving behind nothing but the ripples of the water. She crouched down and placed one paw slightly forward. She would do this slowly.

Suddenly, Blackpaw crashed onto a rock in the marsh. The frog moved to leap into the water, but Emberpaw was ready and thrust her paw forward, swatting the frog away from the water. She raced

after it and sliced it open swiftly.

Blackpaw crouched down and leapt back to the bank. “How did I do?” He asked.

“You made it even worse,” Emberpaw gripped her catch. “Have you caught anything?”

Blackpaw shook his head. “I haven’t even seen anything.”

Emberpaw shrugged. “Let’s get this back to camp,” She nodded. “Maybe we can save someone from starving.”

Blackpaw dipped his head to her. “You go ahead.” He mewed. “I don’t want to return just yet, just in case I catch something afterwards.”

Emberpaw turned her head to hide her look of doubt. “Okay,” She meowed. “See you back at camp, then.”

Emberpaw ran back to camp, the energy quickly draining from her. She pushed through the thorn tunnel and winced as hopeful glances turned her way. She sighed and dropped her prey in the small hole in the clearing.

“At least you caught something.” A reassuring voice mewed from behind her.

Emberpaw turned to see Darkstar. He was even skinnier than she was.

“I guess so,” She mumbled. “I was hoping to catch something more.”

“So were all the other cats on patrol. But there is simply not a lot of prey to catch.”

Two more cats broke into the clearing. Hawkflight and Eaglewings burst into the clearing, each clutching two rats in their jaws.

“I know rats aren’t the tastiest.” Eaglewings mewed around his catch. “But the abandoned twoleg nest is full of them!”

Emberpaw's ears perked. She stood up, ready to assist them. So did a few other cats. They pushed past the two hunters out of the clearing, their tails lashing with anticipation.

They rushed through the pines until the old nest came into view. They raced to it and pushed one by one through a small hole in the wall.

At the front of the patrol, Greenpine let out a squeak of excitement. "There are so many!" She yowled out to the other cats.

"Won't they attack?" Shadepaw meowed from behind Emberpaw.

"They seem to be just as tired as we are," Greenpine answered before Emberpaw fit through the hole in the wall herself.

Reddish eyes glared in the dark. Emberpaw grew uncomfortable and fluffed her fur out.

"We need some light in here." Emberpaw heard Dusktide meow.

"I have an idea." Shadepaw responded before leaving the nest again.

There was a grunt from him outside, and suddenly, a board crashed through the roof. Sunlight flooding in, revealing lots of gray rats scuffling in the trash on the floor.

"Good job, Shadepaw." Dusktide meowed up to his son.

Greenpine was the first to leap on a rat. Dusktide followed, and soon the whole patrol was killing rats. Emberpaw watched as a rat scrambled up her father's back and bit his ear. The tabby swatted the rat off instantly.

Emberpaw moved into the light and leapt on top of a rat. It struggled in her grip, but she soon ended its movement. She nudged it away and felt tiny paws land on her back. She squealed and shook the vermin off.

"I can't believe we actually have to eat rats!" Grayfern mewed, swiping a rat with her claws. Emberpaw felt a sharp stab in her

shoulder. She watched as Dusktide moved toward her and swiped a rat off her shoulder.

“Thanks,” She mewed.

After a long while of clawing and biting, the cats stopped and looked around.

“We won’t be hungry after this,” Greenpine mewed, picking up three rats by their tails. Her eyes widened and she froze mid-step.

Emberpaw followed her gaze and felt her heart skip a beat. In the back corner of the nest, Dusktide was slumped, his eyes open but glazed. Blood pooled from three elaborate gashes in his throat.

Shadepaw let out a cry and flung himself to his father. Emberpaw crept over to the warrior, her heart swelling with sadness. Her throat tightened and she sniffed her father’s pelt, knowing he was already gone.

“All that matters is we won’t starve now.” Pebbletooth shouldered past the cats and moved to squeeze out of the hole.

Emberpaw turned her head, her different color eyes blazing. “There’s nothing to be sad about?” She mewed. “My father is dead, and that’s all you care about, that we have some measly rats to hold us over before we starve?”

Pebbletooth turned to her but said nothing. Standing beside Emberpaw, Grayfern lashed her tail. “Emberpaw’s right.” The gray tabby stepped closer to Pebbletooth. “You shouldn’t be so rude.”

“It’ll be fine. Let’s not fight amongst ourselves. We’re a Clan, and we need to be loyal to each other.” Eaglewings mewed.

Cats around Emberpaw nodded. Greenpine and Grayfern picked up Dusktide and left the nest, all others carrying their catches. They didn’t seem to be sad that she’d lost her father at all! Even Shadepaw sprang from the den, licking his lips.

Emberpaw moved out after the cats and followed them through the snow. Emberpaw felt numb, and not because her paws were cold.

Her father was laid in the center of the camp. Cats moved to him and paid their respects briefly.

Emberpaw stood at the edge of the clearing, her eyes watching her father's body, unmoving. Finally, she padded over to him and lied down, pressing her nose to his ear.

"Dusktide," She whispered. "Why weren't you there for me?"

Emberpaw curled her tail around herself. She felt like she had never been exposed to someone who cared about her. Her brothers didn't need her, or want her around at all. Her mom had always been dead since she'd been born, and now Dusktide had joined her. It even felt like Mintfoot wanted nothing to do with her either. Only just realizing how little anyone cared for her, anger coursed through her.

Just then, a cat let out a wail.

Emberpaw whipped around to see Grayfern standing over Darkstar's limp body. Goldenshade leapt over to them both and nudged Grayfern back. "It's okay; he just lost a life from hunger."

Emberpaw felt a prick of guilt that the tom had been trying to feed the whole Clan before himself. Her hunger had been lost to her after the hunt, and she lied down beside her father, not feeling any grief.

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Emberpaw felt her anger grow throughout the days. The pine forest was only getting colder now, and she barely felt the chill. She knew that she would never be able to speak to her father about her feelings, and how he never had time for her. But she didn't mind.

She just wanted to be mad at everyone, for not caring for her. She knew in her mind that she wasn't overreacting, and that she had a right to be mad at her father.

"He had his own duties," She meowed to the quiet forest. "I mean, you can hold a grudge, Emberpaw, but he had his own life. Besides, Mintfoot took care of you."

She sat down and watched as a little mouse scuttled through the dead pine needles. She thought she should chase after it, but it wasn't worth it. *Mintfoot didn't love you like a daughter either!*

"He should have been with me. I can't be sad if he didn't act like my father." Confused, she stood up again and flexed her claws in the dirt. The sun did nothing to warm her pelt. She felt cold and alone on the inside.

I need to stop fighting myself, she thought. She fluffed her fur out and felt the sting of anger coming back. He couldn't have been doing his warrior liabilities all those times.

"You never loved me!" She spat at the stony gray sky. She let out an angry yowl and swiped her claws at a pine.

Bark and wood splinters exploded from the tree. Her claw was wrenched, but she didn't care.

Behind her, she scented Darkstar and turned her head. There seemed to be a glint of fear in his eyes.

Fear? Don't fool yourself, Emberpaw. He's not scared of you. There was something more hidden there.

"Emberpaw, you should eat something," The tom meowed simply. "Go back to camp."

Emberpaw curled her lip and turned away, trudging back to camp.

"Do you want to help bury Dusktide?" Molefoot rasped.

"No!" She spat coldly, pushing past the elder.

Around her, cats started to stare. She bit her tongue and moved to the fresh-kill pile, taking a scrawny rat back to her nest.

She barely tasted the dull flavor and struggled to swallow the prey. It was dry and nasty.

"Emberpaw, is something troubling you? Besides Dusktide's death, I mean."

Emberpaw glared up at Tigerlily. “Nothing.” She mumbled through a vile mouthful of rat.

Tigerlily shrugged and moved away from the entrance of the den. Shadepaw moved in as soon as she’d gone, and Emberpaw heard him let out a soft whimper.

“He never had time for you, either,” She whispered. He scarcely heard her, only turning his head slightly to give her a glance.

Emberpaw’s gaze returned to the rat between her paws.

“You don’t even seem to care about Dusktide.” Shadepaw hissed at her.

“That’s my business, and not yours.” She responded.

Shadepaw looked confused. “Are you saying that you really don’t care?”

“What do you think, you mouse-brain? I gave him the same amount of love that he gave me.”

Shadepaw’s pelt ruffled. “What are you talking about?”

“He didn’t spend any time with us.” She mewed, exasperated.

“But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t love us.”

Emberpaw heard a squeal from the clearing and saw Birdkit and Stonekit racing after Adderstrike while Featherfall watched from the nursery. She beckoned with her tail. “There’s a perfect example.”

There was a flash of sadness in his eyes. “But you should still grieve for him, even if he never played with us. I mean, just because he never played with us doesn’t mean that he didn’t love us.”

Emberpaw flicked her tail tip. “I don’t care what you think. It’s too late for you to change my mind.” And with that, she turned away from him and finished her rat.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

“He will be renamed Thistlekit and begin his apprentice training in about four moons,” Darkstar explained. “Until then, Mintfoot has agreed to take care of him.”

Emberpaw turned to look at Mintfoot, who let out a soft purr. The scarred tabby kit looked a lot older than two moons to her; he had fierce amber eyes that met Darkstar’s gaze with some sort of challenge. Emberpaw watched as he turned his gaze toward her and she was the first to break the gaze.

Darkstar leapt down from the branch he was perched and moved into his den. The sun was still light in the sky, and Emberpaw stared at the mouth of the den in puzzlement. It wasn’t often that he retired to his den before nightfall.

“Emberpaw.” Goldenshade crossed over to her. “You’re on night patrol with Nightpool, Sparrowpaw, Adderstrike, and Pebbletooth.”

Emberpaw nodded and her eyes instantly located the patrol. She padded over and watched as the hunting patrol came back with more rats; this time, none of them were injured.

The patrol silently moved from the camp. Pebbletooth gave her wary glances; were they *really* scared of her? She had only snapped at some of them once. Why was every cat acting so strange around her?

Even Sparrowpaw was unusually silent. Emberpaw caught up to him and mewed to him, “Are you going to the gathering in a few nights?”

“I don’t know yet.” The tom answered.

Emberpaw stiffened at the silence afterwards. “Do you want to go

hunting later?"

Sparrowpaw's eyes focused on something in front of him. "Not really, Emberpaw." He answered.

Hurt shone in her eyes, and she dropped to the back of the patrol. Her closest friend even wanted to avoid her.

They padded in silence until they reached the ThunderClan border, and Nightpool made conversation with Pebbletooth. Emberpaw helped to remark the border and then allowed the cats to start back to camp.

"Where are you going?" Adderstrike mewed to her when she moved to veer off the path, into the trees.

"I'm going hunting, by myself." She added with a scowl. Sparrowpaw laid back his ears.

"I said no because you've been a jerk," He blurted out, his eyes narrowed back at her. "You're not grieving for your dad, you're just being mad, taking your anger out on everyone else, and you just need to bite your tongue!"

Emberpaw lashed her tail. He glared at her. "It's true, and you know it."

She turned around and plunged into the trees. He was right, but she didn't want to hear it. She lied down by the stream and took a drink before resting her head on her paws. She just needed to cool off.

After a moment, she stretched her claws and went to look for prey.

By the marsh, she quickly located a frog and leapt on top of it, quickly pinning it and killing it. She started a pile of prey and quickly located a small bird. She crouched down and silently stalked it before leaping onto it. She killed it in a flurry of feathers.

Next, she sniffed around and found a nest of shrews. By then, she was finished hunting and groomed her pelt quickly.

"Maybe there's more prey during the night," She mewed to herself,

surprised at the amount of prey that she'd found so quickly.

Emberpaw dragged her catches back to camp and dropped them on the pile. She went back for the rest of her shrews, unable to carry them all herself, and returned to the camp.

"You caught a lot of prey." Grayfern commented.

Emberpaw forced herself to be nicer. "Thank you," She mewed. Emberpaw watched as Grayfern picked up a shrew. "Want to share?" She asked.

"Sure." Emberpaw meowed and followed her as she sat at the edge of the clearing.

Grayfern took the first bite. "I like this a lot more than rats," She meowed. Emberpaw's own mouth watered, and she ripped the meat from the shrew.

In a few more bites, the shrew was gone. Emberpaw stood up and smiled at Grayfern before pushing into the apprentices' den to sleep.

Emberpaw settled with her back to Sparrowpaw. He didn't seem to care, so she shut her eyes and curled her tail around herself before falling asleep.

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"She's making an effort to control her anger. But I fear that Dusktide's death will only make it worse."

Dusktide stared at Yellowfang. "My daughter is not evil. She will never become what you're expecting. She is only talented because she chooses to be, through training and practice. It isn't because she has heritage from all the Clans."

"He's right. Quit worrying, you old bag of fleas." Cedarstar meowed.

"I'm sorry, Cedarstar, Dusktide, but I have to agree with Yellowfang. I scarcely see her with her claws sheathed. She may not

destroy the Clans, but there is definitely still some violence in her." Darkstar, who'd been silent, spoke.

"Many ShadowClan cats like to battle." Cedarstar remarked.

"But not like Emberpaw. She has reason to want to claw pelts off, I'm sure. If I knew what they were, I'd tell you. She doesn't like to battle, either. She just attacks whenever she gets angry at someone." Darkstar responded.

Dusktide stuck his nose in the air. "I would rather have Emberpaw live a normal life, without you worrying about what she's doing every night. My kits have the stature of other Clans, but so did I. I could swim, and I had the strong legs to do it. But I was also light on my paws. I have those things from RiverClan and ShadowClan."

"Yes, but you're leaving out ShadowClan's thirst to kill." Yellowfang meowed.

"Not all cats have a thirst to kill." Dusktide hissed.

"But I think that Emberpaw will."

Dusktide's fur stood along his spine. "Stop worrying about her! She is a loyal and trustworthy cat of ShadowClan. She will not grow up to be a killer."

Darkstar stood. "Neither will Shadepaw or Blackpaw," He nodded.

"I know the prophecy." Yellowfang spat. "I say it before you now, so you know that this isn't kits-play. 'Three kits will be born with the abilities of all the Clans. They will rise up and conquer the other Clans to feel blood under their claws. Only the white bird can be trusted.'"

"The white bird?" Dusktide repeated. "Can't you StarClan cats be more straightforward?"

"It is not my duty to tell you who to trust and who not to. All you need to do is watch out for all of them. Try to keep them all under control."

“Since when was there a prophecy?” Darkstar hissed. “Yellowfang, you can’t make up these prophecies! You don’t know anything about the future. You don’t understand this yourself.”

Yellowfang shook her raggedy pelt. “Very well, then.” She snarled. “I’ll just talk about it to the many new members of StarClan, after they’re killed for no reason!”

“The three apprentices are no more killers than you were,” Runningnose approached Yellowfang. “I knew you would never kill those kits. Don’t you have a little faith in them?”

“You think that I’m crazy, but just you wait.” Yellowfang spat.

“I’ll wait as long as I have to so that I can prove you wrong.” Cedarstar meowed.

And with that, the cats turned and parted, leaving Darkstar to fade away.

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Emberpaw trailed at the end of the patrol behind Ravenpaw. The she-cat had also stopped talking to her.

Anger coursed through Emberpaw. She’d never done anything to the black she-cat.

“Emberpaw, can you and Sparrowpaw hunt by the marsh? I’ll hunt with Shadepaw, and Ravenpaw, you go with Hawkflight to the Twoleg nest.” Brokenleg instructed.

Emberpaw felt her stomach churn. Sparrowpaw met her gaze with an expression that was impossible to read, and Emberpaw felt her throat tighten. She missed the friendliness in his gaze.

Emberpaw watched as Brokenleg and Shadepaw bounded away on paws innately silent, and Ravenpaw and Hawkflight left in the other direction. She turned to Sparrowpaw and realization flashed in her eyes; she was getting upset because Sparrowpaw was the only one who really seemed to like her. He’d wanted her around him, up until a few days ago.

Emberpaw sniffed and allowed him to lead the way to the marsh. There was silence that followed as he split away from her and moved around the edge of the marsh, searching for prey.

Emberpaw suppressed a yawn and padded away from the marsh, into the nearby trees. She watched as a black bird fluttered up into a tree and wondered if they prey was coming back.

Carefully, she climbed up the trunk of the tree and onto the sturdy branch that the bird was on. She stepped across the branch slowly, and then took a valiant leap.

The bird wasn't prepared for her attack. She bit down on its neck and killed it.

"Emberpaw!"

Emberpaw stiffened as her name echoed through the trees. She leapt down from the tree slowly and padded back to the marsh.

Sparrowpaw stood on the bank, his claws dug into the dirt. He peered out into the murky waters.

Emberpaw followed his gaze to the other side of the marsh, where a brown rock poked out of the water. Suddenly, the rock moved and disappeared into the water.

"What was that?" She mewed.

"A snake." The tom answered, leaping out onto a flat rock in the marsh. "Would you help me catch it?"

Emberpaw locked eyes with him. His were still not friendly looking.

"Sure." She replied and positioned herself on the bank. "I'm ready to claw it."

Sparrowpaw watched the water carefully. "Maybe it's already gone."

They waited for a minute before Emberpaw nodded. "That's a shame; that snake would've fed at least five cats."

“Five? I say ten,” Sparrowpaw responded.

There was a small splash in the water. Emberpaw whipped around and looked for the snake in the water, but found none through the muddy water.

Just then, a huge streak of brown flashed into the air. Emberpaw watched as its fangs connected with Sparrowpaw’s shoulder. The tom, startled, fell back into the water with a splash.

Emberpaw gasped as the snake disappeared beneath the water as well. She waited for Sparrowpaw to come back up but nothing moved in the water.

There was a heave of water, and Emberpaw gathered her courage. She leapt into the water, immediately blinded by the unclear water.

She reached out with her paws and swam around before her tail touched fur. Coming up for air, she went back down and gripped the tom’s scruff, struggling to pull him from the water.

She climbed from the marsh and leapt back as the snake unhooked its fangs from Sparrowpaw’s neck. It moved to slide back into the water, but Emberpaw leapt on top of it and sunk her teeth into it.

It continued to wriggle. Emberpaw buried her claws in it and tore out what she thought had to be its throat. The snake stopped moving, and she pulled it away from the water in case it had any ideas of escaping.

She turned to Sparrowpaw and felt fear rush through her. The tom had visible bite marks on his shoulder, neck, and throat. Blood rushed from the wounds, and a thin line of blood trickled from his mouth as he coughed up water.

Sparrowpaw stopped coughing and laid still, his eyes shut.

Emberpaw looked for the familiar rise and fall of his flank. It was heavy, and his shallow breaths came out quick and uneven.

Emberpaw quickly looked around and thought about what to do before rushing back to camp.

It didn't take long for her to reach the camp and find Tigerlily. She quickly explained what had happened, and Tigerlily quickly gathered cobweb and some green leaves and followed Emberpaw from the camp.

As soon as they reached the marsh, Tigerlily pounced upon Sparrowpaw and crunched up the leaves, spitting them onto his wounds. She then stopped the bleeding with cobweb and stepped over to the snake.

"It doesn't look venomous, but I can never be sure." She mewed. "Sparrowpaw would probably be dead by now if it was poisonous."

Emberpaw shivered and looked over at Sparrowpaw. If he'd died, he'd still think that she didn't like him. She wanted to be friends again.

Hawkflight had appeared by the marsh. He sat by the apprentice, a worried look on his face. Emberpaw couldn't figure out why Sparrowpaw kept getting hurt.

Please, StarClan, let him live so I can apologize for being so rude to him, and to everyone else, she thought. She watched as Ravenpaw solemnly pressed her nose to Sparrowpaw's ear and turned to face Emberpaw, her eyes narrowed. Did she blame her for this?

"Emberpaw, Hawkflight, head back to camp." Tigerlily ordered. "Ravenpaw, you can stay."

Ravenpaw nodded and stared at the marsh, as if watching for another large snake.

"The wounds aren't especially mortal, but you should know that there is still a chance he'll die," Emberpaw heard Tigerlily tell Ravenpaw as she trudged after Hawkflight.

The cats padded into the camp, and Hawkflight placed his prey onto the small pile. It was growing, though, and Emberpaw felt a spark of hope; no more cats would hopefully starve.

Across the clearing, Mintfoot was sitting beside Sunfade, watching Thistlekit and Leafkit tussle in the dirt. Emberpaw watched as

Thistlekit twisted out of Leafkit's grasp and leapt to his paws, quickly springing onto the older kit's back.

There was something odd about him; maybe it was that he could already beat Leafkit, the almost apprentice. Again, he seemed to realize that she was looking at him and turned to face her. The kit padded over to her.

"What's your name?" Thistlekit asked without a greeting.

"Emberpaw." She answered. "I'm sorry about your mom…?" She asked. She gave him a questioning glance, and he nodded.

"I'm sorry about your dad." He meowed. He already seemed to know everything about ShadowClan.

"How'd you know?" She asked. "I mean, that he was my dad?"

"I've heard your name before, in conversation." The kit meowed.

Emberpaw was surprised. This kit seemed… A bit too smart.

"You're just two moons old?" She asked.

The kit shook his head. "I'm actually five," He nodded.

Emberpaw was surprised at how open he was with the information. "Why didn't you tell someone?" She mewed. "You could already be an apprentice in a moon."

"I don't know." He mumbled. "I want cats to trust me. I don't think that jumping into a Clan and already being trusted with a lot of responsibilities is a good idea. I want to learn things that happen around the camp first."

Emberpaw shrugged. "I guess that's fair," She mewed.

She watched as the tom turned away. He was smart, even for five moons old.

"Hey, Emberpaw!" Birdkit's cream and white pelt flashed at the edge of her vision. "Do you want to play a game?" Her hazel eyes

gleamed.

Emberpaw paused. She felt bad for turning down the offer, but she really had other things on her mind.

But then again, she didn't want Birdkit to think she was mean. "Alright," She meowed. "What are we playing?"

Birdkit gave her a smile before starting to explain. Emberpaw smiled back; she needed to gain back her Clanmates' trust, before they avoided her completely.

Chapter 13

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The clearing buzzed with different cats' voices. Emberpaw watched as Streakpaw talked with a pretty white she-cat before padding over to her.

"Where's Sparrowpaw?" He asked, looking around.

"He got attacked by a snake." She responded. He was doing much better since yesterday, but he still didn't go to that night's Gathering.

Streakpaw looked startled. "Is he okay?" He inquired.

"He'll be fine, Tigerlily said." Emberpaw nodded. She looked past Streakpaw and thought about how lucky Sparrowpaw was.

"Do you want to talk with some other cats before the Gathering starts?" The tom mewed.

"Sure," Emberpaw replied, following Streakpaw across the island. He stopped at a group of older apprentices. They examined Emberpaw carefully before greeting Streakpaw.

"I'm Salmonpaw, and that's Splashpaw." A ginger tabby tom meowed to her. He beckoned to a gray and white she-cat with a long pelt. Emberpaw greeted them both with a nod.

"I'm Foxpaw," A mottled brown tom meowed. Beside him, Ravenpaw watched her, tail tip flicking. "And you know Ravenpaw."

Emberpaw nodded, settling down beside Streakpaw. Beside her, a black and white tom dipped his head. "I'm Reedpaw," he mewed. "It's nice to meet you."

She nodded and smiled. "I'm Emberpaw," she answered.

“I like the truce between the Clans much better,” Streakpaw mewed to the cats. “It’s a lot better than fighting.”

Salmonpaw gave a nasty glance to Ravenpaw. The secretive she-cat flicked her tail. “RiverClan has done a lot of pelt ripping as well, Salmonpaw.”

Splashpaw nodded. “She’s right.”

Minnowstar yowled to start the Gathering. “RiverClan is doing just fine without anyone’s help. Even though the rivers are nearly frozen again, we’ve been hunting on land,” he announced proudly, as if he’d forgotten that he’d practically been begging for ShadowClan to give them more territory. “During those few warm days, the rivers thawed, and we’ve stocked the fresh kill pile.” The tom stepped back.

Applestar went next. “ThunderClan is thriving,” She meowed. She looked around at the crowd. “I don’t really have much to say, except that we found RiverClan scent and ShadowClan scent over our borders."

Immediately, yowls of protest erupted.

Minnowstar hissed and raised his tail. Most of the cats fell silent. “Applestar, we do not share a border with ThunderClan.” He gazed at her calmly. “How would RiverClan scent get there?”

“I wondered that as well.” She glared at him. “Stay on your own territory.”
Darkstar shrugged. “Whatever you say, Applestar,” he mewed before speaking himself. “ShadowClan is doing just fine. We have two new kits, Floodkit and Thistlekit.”

Lastly, Ashstar addressed the cats. “We have two new warriors; Skyflame and Pigeontail.” She shook her long silver pelt. “The hunting is well and our borders are secure.”

With that, the leaders spoke quietly amongst each other. Emberpaw turned back to the crowd of apprentices; none of the ThunderClan cats seemed to believe their leader’s rumors about ShadowClan

scent across the border.

Reedpaw's tail brushed hers lightly as he swept it around himself. "Do you believe Applestar?" He mewed to Foxpaw.

"Lately, my leader has been going crazy," he answered. Emberpaw looked at him in question, and he shrugged. "She rarely talks to anyone now. She doesn't come out of her den until the moon is up, and then she sits in the center of the camp and stares at it."

"She does?" Streakpaw meowed. "That's pretty weird."

Foxpaw nodded. "I know," he breathed. "She always murmurs to herself too."

Emberpaw flicked a fragment of dried leaf from her short fur and stifled a yawn. The apprentices were boring her. She got to her paws as soon as Darkstar began to lead the cats away and out of the clearing.

When Emberpaw trudged into the camp, she found Sparrowpaw sitting by the entrance of the medicine cat's den. She trotted over to him, her eyes wide.

"I'm fine," he meowed, reading her concerned expression. She flicked her ears and bowed her head, mewing, "I'm glad. The apprentices were looking for you."

"Did you hear anything new?" Sparrowpaw asked. Emberpaw shook her head. "Only the same news as always," she responded. "Except, Applestar accused RiverClan cats of crossing the border, even though they don't share a border with ThunderClan. They accused us, too."

"That's odd. She may be getting a bit too old for her job, don't you think?" He purred in amusement. Emberpaw, extremely tired, shrugged and padded over to the apprentices' den.

Once inside, she curled up in her nest and tucked her nose under her tail, ready for a long sleep.

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Only a few moments seemed to pass before Emberpaw awoke. She stretched and yawned widely, expecting to be faced with the familiar surroundings of the apprentices' den; sleeping cats, bracken and moss nests, and faint sunlight gleaming in through the bramble.

But instead, she was surrounded on all sides by a flat moor. *StarClan's hunting grounds,* she thought.

On one side of her, an old she-cat sat, her pelt sticking out in some parts. Her yellow eyes gleamed as she looked up at Emberpaw.

On the other side of her, a flame colored tom sat, his head high and his thin tail curled around him. He met her gaze and padded closer.

"Greetings, Emberpaw," the old she-cat meowed. "I am Yellowfang. We've come to warn you."

Emberpaw stared at Yellowfang. "You're going to warn me about what?" She cocked her head, and the she-cat stood. Her claws flexed anxiously.

From somewhere close, the tom's scent washed over her. "We've come to warn you about yourself."

"Me?" Emberpaw folded her ears. "What did I do?"

"You've done nothing." The regal tom's eyes softened. "At least, for now, you're a good apprentice. You will be a great warrior one day."

Emberpaw didn't feel the warmth of praise. Her pelt felt heavy, and she pulled herself to a stand. Yellowfang drew closer and gave her a small nod. "There is power surging beneath your pelt. You were given the powers from birth… You have WindClan's speed, ThunderClan's agility, RiverClan's strength, and ShadowClan's cunning." Her voice dripped with the opposite of admiration. "With these things, and ShadowClan's need for a battle, you are a danger."

"I am not a danger!" Emberpaw protested. "I've done nothing but serve my Clan since my birth!"

The tom dipped his head. "Emberpaw, I know you aren't dangerous.

But you must understand that it is not just these traits you possess." He flashed a look of suspicion at her. "There is something more. Powers are there that StarClan did not gift you."

"What do you mean?" Emberpaw mewed.

"Your power is that you are a gifted fighter. There is no move in combat that you can't complete. You can read your opponents, figure out their next moves." Yellowfang answered.

"How do you know? I've never felt these powers." Emberpaw wondered if the old cats had gone insane.

"I've watched you in battle. If you put forth the effort, you can defeat any opponent." The flaming ginger tom dipped his head to her. "We're telling you this so that you can put your powers to good use."

"You want me to use my abilities for the good of my Clan? Or do you mean all of them?" Emberpaw stared at her paws, wondering if she really had the powers. She had never been excellent in the training clearing, no better than the other apprentices.

"Whatever you feel is necessary, you will do, Emberpaw." Yellowfang rasped. With a dip of her head, she began to fade away, along with the tom.

Emberpaw didn't call for them. She only stared at her paws in wonder before making a decision.

"StarClan, I vow to use my powers to protect my Clan." She raised her muzzle to the sky before the ground faded around her.